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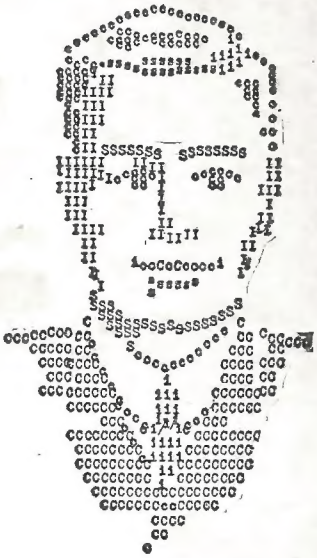

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REAL WESTERN

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Volume 14 **October, 1948** **Number 2**

COMPLETE NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

The SMUGGLER

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The U. S. Army wanted Jim Cort for smuggling, and Cort was known as a bad-man and killer. But there wasn't a rancher or nester in the district who wouldn't stand by Cort, come hell or high water!

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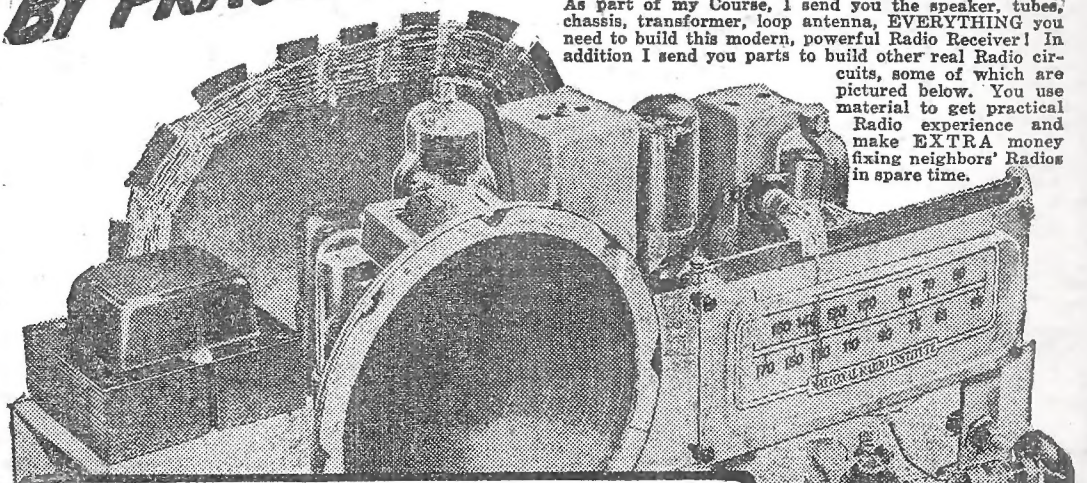

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Suspenseful Book-Length Novel

Complete In This Issue

He was Jim Cort, smuggler, killer and desperado — but now he was weary of these things and wanted to settle down. But the ambitions of Lieutenant Hardy, the hatred of Lon Pearson, the raider, and the greed of Sailor Morton combined against him. And then he came across the girl he'd been trying to forget all these years in the Arizona territory . . .

Sailor Morton had heard Cort say it was every man for himself . . .

1

JIM CORT awoke in his camp last night, aware that something was very much wrong. He didn't know why; perhaps because he was getting a little nervous and uneasy of late. This thing had begun to get on his nerves during the past few weeks. It had been that way, he thought, ever since he had decided he'd had enough of smuggling and was going to quit.

He came up on an elbow, the .44 pistol he always kept beneath his pillow gripped in his right hand. He lay in his blankets under the cottonwoods, listening. The camp fire long since had died down to a bed of ash covered coals; the trees were silent except for the occasional sleepy twitter of a bird. Overhead a Mexican moon, crescent shaped, looked down upon the shallow waters of the *Rio de la Conception*. For this was south of the Arizona Territory—Sonora border line, the camp his headquarters.

A glance at the blankets of his Apache helper, Red Calf, showed them to be empty. The Indian was gone, faded like the shadows around the camp.

Cort came up noiselessly and slipped on a pair of moccasins; handiwork of a wild woman of the murderous Sonora Apaches who were too often slipping across into Arizona Territory to join their northern brethren in deadly raids.

He wasn't too worried about Red Calf insofar as loyalty was concerned. The pay was too good and so was the whiskey Cort brought back from Tuscon for Red Calf and the members of his family. It was Jim Cort's ticket of safety among the

most dangerous branch of the Indian tribes known to white men—that and the fact that he had saved the Indian's life.

So Cort, at the moment, wasn't too worried about his helper. The men from the ship weren't due for another four or five days yet, and Red Calf might have heard night signals unknown to white men, even one like Cort, that a tribal dance or a "sing" was in progress, following a successful foray over into Arizona.

Cort went first up among the nearby rocks to the pack mules. They dozed, well fed on the grain he brought back from Tuscon, and the sky told him that the time was past midnight. The rocks that walled in the stream on each side and helped to hide his camp threw out only darker shadows from the faint crescent overhead. Cort slipped to the sandy floor again; then a moving shadow caught his eye: he froze and waited. That faintly discernible shadow coming toward him was an Apache. The shadow came on, approached the camp, paused. Then came a soft but far reaching, *"hoo-oo."*

It was not the hoot of an owl, but the sound the Apaches made while gigging their ponies along and digging at them with moccasined heels. It was Red Calf, seeing the empty blankets and signalling to him.

Red Calf knew about that .44 beneath Cort's pillow and that the white man who employed him was a light sleeper and a deadly shot.

"Aqui," Cort answered in Spanish. Here.

The Indian came forward and glided into the shadows. He spoke no English; nor had Cort, after years as a borderman, been able to master more than a few words of Apache. They spoke Spanish, Cort fluently, the Indian harshly.

He came up to Cort, slim and lithe; a man who might have been twenty-three or twenty-five. It was hard to tell the age of these wild Apaches. Cort had found him one day two years before, crawling along a rocky trail, a bullet squarely through his belly; dying of thirst. He could still remember that sinewy hand, reaching for a knife, the man's beady black eyes looking up at him without fear; the eyes of a cornered animal who knew he was about to be killed.

Red Calf was one Apache the hard-riding, frustrated soldiers hadn't missed.

It wasn't until Cort had taken off his gun belt and unslung a pack from a mule, and brought out a canteen, that the fire in the black eyes had died. The grip on the knife handle had relaxed as Jim Cort, smuggler, cut away the dirty shirt and did a crude job of bandaging the wound.

Just how the Apache ever had managed to survive that long distance slug still lodged somewhere in his entrails, Jim Cort would never know. But Red Calf had survived..another reason for loyalty.

HE CAME closer to Cort. He wore an old, floppy hat and a long, ragged black coat, both probably the property of some unfortunate rancher, now dead. His loins carried a breech clout. From above the knee to his thighs never seemed to bother Red Calf when the night air of the mountains found them on the trail, coming to or going from old Tuscon.

"They come," he said, and pointed back down the river.

"Who?" rapped out Cort sharply.

"My four brothers with men from big boat."

Cort unconsciously felt himself relax, and again the thought struck him that he'd been growing a bit taut recently. It was always that way, he guessed, when a man was making his last trip. Smuggling was fast becoming more dangerous every day. The soldiers up at Fort Huachuca were making things tough. The fort had been erected over there in 1877 in order that the cavalry could have a two-way shot at cutting off maurading Apaches breaking away from the reservation, sweeping south, and then streaking into Old Mexico temporarily to join their brethren down there. And with the desert being combed more and more by those dusty, clank-

ing cavalry patrols, the flow of alien Chinese, 'dobie dollars, silks, emeralds, and other commodities so dear to the people who could pay and ask no questions had been valved a bit.

The timid smuggler, the cautious, fast were disappearing. Only the bold—men like Jim Cort—were left. And Cort told himself that he was quitting. He had never bothered with such a thing as alien Chinese—he did not believe in it; it was against his principles. But when it came to 'dobie dollars, silks, and emeralds.. He remembered the burning desire, the bitterness that had engulfed him all these lonesome years, and he salved his conscience with the thought that if he didn't bring in what people wanted, then somebody else would.

He was still remembering Neely Anderson, her laughter at him, and he knew he was a fool for harboring such thoughts.

True, there was still a big stream of contraband flowing across the border into the Territory. Bold, flamboyant, swaggering Lon Pearson and his raiders were still in the business, plus their cattle raids, their masked hold-ups of stages, their killing of other smugglers and seizing pack trains. Bold Lon, who with his men swaggered into saloons and gaming houses and flounted their wealth and strength in the faces of timid lawmen. Lou was still operating. He who had lost one man and another shot through an arm when Cort's saddle horse and one fast mule outran them through an ambush.

Then, too, there was vicious old man Clanton with his brood of equally vicious sons. One of them. Billy, at eighteen was to lose his life in the O K corral in a new silver boom camp called Tombstone, in a shoot-out with the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday—a shoot-out that was to cost Billy and the two McLowry brothers their lives.

Even old man Clanton and his sons had inadvertently helped Captain Hardy's soldiers by ambushing a Mexican pack train and killing more than twenty men in it.

No doubt about it, Cort thought, the smuggling business was getting tough; and the thought of Hardy brought back the bitterness to his lips as he heard the first sounds of the oncoming flat-boat. It took him back six years to a certain big town back east and a girl named Neely Anderson he had tried so hard to forget.

Hardy had said there in the desert just four weeks before, eyeing the single pack mule Cort was bringing back from Tuscon: "Not a thing in it, Jim, so it's too bad we didn't get you when you went north. But don't worry, my boy; the Army is slow but it wins out. I'll get you yet."

"Just a mule I picked up up north," Cort had answered harshly, looking sardonically at the ring of dusty soldiers surrounding him. "Taking him south to trade."

"Indeed, Jim?" with much sarcasm. "Your boys look a little gaunted, Bert. You too. What do you lads think of Geronimo now?"

A hard, dark, almost savage frown across the ambitious face. "We'll get him. Don't you worry about that. We will get him, and we'll get you, too, Jim. Too bad a man with your gentlemanly upbringing and education couldn't have chosen a better profession than smuggling."

Cort had let that one go by with a hard, taciturn grin across his lean, unshaved face. "If you mean my resigning at West Point after a year because I happen to be a man who is free and can't take army disicipline, had I any regrets concerning my decision, they're all swept away at sight of you. No, thanks, Bertie; I'll stick to prospecting and a few other things."

He had ridden on through them, after their thorough search of his pack outfit, and the words that floated after him seared themselves into his brain for weeks afterward. "I'll be glad to tell Neely that when I see her in Tuscon on my next leave, Jim!

She posted me a letter from there last week. They've come west to live."

JIM CORT shook off the savage thoughts as the small, flat-bottomed boat worked its way out of the sluggish waters and grounded within thirty feet of his camp. Red Calf had gone to the fire, stirred up the coals, and thrown on dry brush from a big pile nearby. The brush blazed brightly and into the light of the fire came several men; four deadly-looking Apaches, brothers of Red Calf, a small, wiry looking Mexican, and the damndest-looking white man Cort had ever seen.

He was a seaman but he looked more like a pirate off the Spanish Main. A bloodthirsty, cut-throat pirate. And he smelled almost as odorously as the four beady-eyed, sullen looking Apaches.

He stood a good six feet four inches, and his giant frame showed him to be a mass of knotty muscles. He was dressed in a dirty rag for a headpiece, a sleeveless leather jacket laced with thongs up the front, ragged knee breeches, and a pair of heavy leather boots of a kind Cort had never seen before. His bare forearms, huge and iron hard, were covered with weird-looking tattoes that must have brought respect from the four Indians. Had his beard and mustache been soaped and rinsed clean they would have come out the color of corn silk.

He wore two pistols and three wicked looking knives in a four-inch leather belt around his waist. "Ahoy!" he boomed in a voice, in keeping with his size.

He got out of the boat and came toward the fire, carrying two duffle bags.

"Who're you?" Cort asked curtly.

"Sailor Morton, mate! First mate on the four master *Sally Ann*, just in from the China Seas."

He advanced to the fire, put down the two duffle bags very gently, and warmed his hands near the blaze, his great figure throwing grotesque shadows on the rocks back of him. Cort ignored him and looked at the Mexican, a question in his eyes. The Mexican was a slim, wiry, intelligent man with a flowing black mustache; Garcia, former officer—and probably deserter—from the Mexican Army, *segundo* to Valesquez, with whom Cort did business.

Garcia mostly always came these trips.

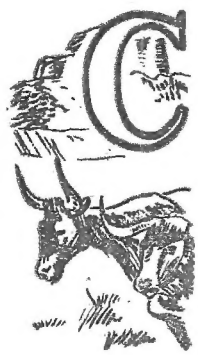
"What's he doing here?" Cort rapped out in Spanish. "Where's Valesquez?"

The Sailor swung on him with a hard eye, his yellow teeth showing in a grin through the beard. "I speak it, Mate." he boomed. "It and four other languages, with a smattering of Chinese, Malay, Russian, and a few words of Arabia, picked up in ports all over the world. Valesquez, you say? Where is he? At his headquarters down on the coast. But don't worry about your goods; they're all here. With something else I brought along. I'm going to help you deliver 'em, too."

He laughed a bull throated roar at Cort's hard, questioning look. Red Calf came up and spoke, with a nod at his four brothers.

"They are waiting," he said.

2



CORT nodded and said to Gracia; "I'll be back in a few minutes; have the Indians unload."

He disappeared into the night, climbing up among the rocks. Up there he swung off around the side of a hill, then cut back and faded into the yawning jaws of a steep, rocky-walled canyon. Not even Red Calf knew where this cache was though there was little doubt in Jim's mind that the Apache trailer easily could have found it. But that bullet was still somewhere among

his entrails, he was alive because of the man who hired him, and it was said that an Apache never forgot a friend, never forgave an enemy. Cort was a friend; word of him had spread along the border, and every Indian down there knew where his camp was hidden. Cort's danger always had been the chance of a few renegades raiding his camp, or one of those who knew him being crazed with liquor.

He came back half an hour later, carrying a heavy gunny-sack in one hand and a buckskin bag in the other. The buckskin bag was by far the heavier because it contained gold, minted double eagles.

The four brothers of Red Calf looked at the gunny sack and licked their lips as Cort placed it on the ground, skinned down the top, and brought forth two demijohns of really good whiskey. He always bought the best Tuscon had to offer. He handed over the two jugs.

He didn't feel any too good over such dealings, but whiskey and money was what they wanted for guaranteeing the safety of the boats up the *Rio de la Concepcion*—River of Conception—from the Gulf of California. They had wanted guns, too—those big single shot 45-70 Springfields of the kind the cavalrymen carried on their saddles—but to this demand he had refused adamantly; he wanted the blood of no ranchers and cowpunchers on his hands.

The four Apaches took the jugs and began to chatter among themselves as they uncorked, took huge swigs, and then gave Red Calf a drink. He took one, but Cort's helper drank little, surprising as it seemed. Nevertheless, Jim Cort shook his head as his helper handed back the demijohn.

"No more, Red Calf," he said in Spanish. "We leave with the mules at daybreak on the trails to Tuscon."

The four Indians moved out, gone like shadows, and as silently. Cort knew that in a few more hours, just about daylight, things would start popping in the Apaches' hidden camp back in the mountains. Geronimo was there—Cort had talked with him there just two days before with Red Calf as interpreter—and the man who was driving cavalry generals frantic and their men to exhaustion probably would be the first to get a shot at one of the jugs.

"Whew!" grunted Sailor Morton when they were gone. "I've seen some bloody looking pirates; Arab murderers, mulatto garroters, the scum of the earth in those ports, but none like them. Glad I got here. I wouldn't have gone back anyhow."

"Who told you you could go on?" Court asked curtly. "Why *are* you here, mister?"

The Sailor's booming laugh rolled out again. "I jumped ship down the coast to see Valesquez. No more walking the decks for Sailor Morton. I asked him to send me to you."

"Why?"

"Ho—ho! Why, he asks! You'll see, mate."

Cort ignored him and turned to Garcia and spoke to him in Spanish. The Mexican nodded and indicated the bales of goods piled up close by the fire. He took from his coat pocket an oilskin packet and removed a paper. He handed it to Cort and they began working through the goods, checking each item.

It was all silk this time. Bolt after bolt of lustrous Chinese silk was unwrapped and inspected. Valesquez was a pretty fair man in his dealing, but you never could tell when he might slip in goods soiled or discolored by salt water. Cort examined each. Flaming red and glittering blue colors met the eye; yellows and greens and white softer to the touch than a ball of cottonwood "fuzz" of the kind that floated down to the ground in the spring.

It was all there, enough for five light, compact packs which, if trouble broke, would enable the mules to put on plenty of speed. It lay there on the sand, a fortune in silk. It had been woven six thousand miles away, brought down to the great rivers, loaded on junks and sampans, and carried to Shanghai and Hong Kong, where the wharves teemed and the

great four-master sailing ships lay at anchor with canvas lashed down and the smell of the ocean in the riggings. Then across the stormy Pacific to the coast of Mexico, where the rich Valezquez's schooners took off their share of the cargo and brought some of it north, into the Gulf of California to the mouth of the *Rio Concepcion*. Here some of the smugglers, working into California past San Diego, met and unloaded. Cort's goods came up the river by the flat bottomed boat. Where the stream forked the Mexican crew, except Garcia, left it, giving the oars to four Indians who had waited, sometimes for days. And then another destination, unloaded by a fire where a lean, saturnine-faced man with too many memories of the past waited....with American gold. In the cold of a following dawn, loaded on the bobbing backs of pack mules, it would start its final journey to Tuscon; to Johannes Bruckman, who answered no questions as he sold it to the dressmakers, the stores, the homes of the rich, there to cling snugly to milady's white skin.

CORT NODDED his satisfaction, checked the amount with Garcia, and tossed the bill of lading into the fire. He sat down on a rock, spread the saddle blanket beside him into a square on the sand, and began counting out gold. The pile grew and grew and Sailor Morton's eyes glittered unseen as he watched.

"Got any more of that around, mate?" he asked in a strangely soft voice.

Cort didn't reply. He and Garcia were putting the coins back in the sack once more. Cort looked at the Mexican. "How is business at the schooner?" he asked.

Garcia shrugged. "Not very good, Jim. Many of the men who meet us have been caught crossing into the California country. Others have become frightened by the soldiers and have quit. We'll lay off shore for another two or three weeks and wait. But I hope they show up soon; our rice supply might run out."

"Chinese?"

A nod. "Sixty of them, chattering like monkeys and smelling worse than the Indians." His black eyes narrowed speculatively. "Why don't you take them off our hands, Jim? A tremendous profit for you. You would have a much better chance up this far east because the men who have been running them in work them through by the coast route to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and See-attle. There the patrols are much thicker. Take them, Jim. Let us bring them to your camp in flatboats. Think of the profits!"

"It's too bad Sailor Morton don't know his navigation across that desert," boomed out the big man. "I'd bring the swabs up here in a hurry, and then slit their throats and bury them in the sand when the sojers hove to in sight."

Cort looked at the bearded face, the two pistols and the knives in the broad leather belt. A cut-throat if ever there was one.

"There's a thing called principle, even with a smuggler like myself," he said coolly. "We need settlers over in the Territory, but not pig-tailed coolies who'll work for thirty cents a day and rice."

He said to Garcia, "Did Lon Pearson and or any of his men show up at the boat? No? I didn't expect it. He's more of a raider now," and he told of the attempted ambush.

Garcia said, "I'm sorry. I never liked him."

He rose with the bag of gold and the immobile Red Calf went with him to the boat to help shove off. He would float downstream to the fork and there pick up his waiting men for the return trip to the mouth of the river. He waved goodbye, poled out from the sandy shore, and presently the hull cleared sand.

Only two men knew the location of the camp, besides the Sonora Indians, who never came. Garcia and Valesquez. Now there were three; now there was Sailor Morton.

Jim Cort didn't like it.

HE CAME back to the fire. Red Calf had put on more wood. Cort looked at the huge man who still stood with his front to it, warming his hands, the two duffle bags on the ground beside him. Apparently the few belongings he possessed.

"And now, sir," Jim Cort said to the man, "Whatever you have to say, do so. You were not invited to this camp; you nor any other man besides those here tonight, except Valesquez, are not welcome. I travel alone. I have no friend, no companions except my Indian helper here. At daybreak we're leaving for the north, a trip of about five days. We travel by night after crossing the border. We travel light because of the necessity of speed sometimes. I can't leave you here because I don't want you in this camp neither now nor when I'm absent. Nor could I leave you otherwise. Within forty-eight hours after I did so the dozens of Apaches who have seen the boat but never came to this camp would be dividing your belongings amongst themselves, leaving what was left of you for the coyotes and the buzzards. So you'll go with us, because I have no other choice in the matter. If trouble breaks with renegade Apache raiders down from the reservation, with a cavalry patrol from Fort Huachuca, or with Lon Pearson and his raiders, you are solely on your own. I assume no responsibility for your safety. In fact, I don't give a damn what happens to you, sir."

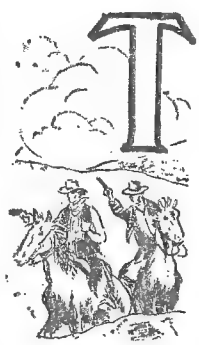
Sailor Morton began to haw-haw, and a good fog horn coming into the Golden Gate at San Francisco on the Barbary Coast couldn't have been heard much further. "Now there's a matey after me own heart! I'd do the same fer you aboard a windjammer. I'd tear the guts out of you scrubbing a deck and send you up the rigging when the wind was howling like a banshee and the old tub's masts rolling forty degrees. And if we had to take to the longboats, you'd be the last one in. Shake on it!"

He thrust out a paw with a grip of iron in his fingers and then sat down on a rock beside Cort. "Listen, Cort," he said seriously. "You don't think I'd jump a good ship like the *Sally Ann* and come through this God-forgotten country just to get to the states again, do you? You don't think I'd ride up a river and a creek with a bunch of murderin', stinkin' Apache Indians as u'd cut a man's throat fer a sou to see new lands, do you? I saw you last year at Valesquez's headquarters, and I says, 'There's my laddie. That's the johnny fer Sailor Morton.' But I needed time. One more trip back to Hong Kong to collect fer the big pile of opium I smuggled in fer a Chinese merchant. He paid off, too. I got 'em!"

He reached up inside the leather thonged coat and his big hand brought forth a soft leather sack. He opened it and a stream of stones reflected back a thousand green colors in the flickering light of the fire.

"Emeralds," the Sailor said sonorously.

3



THEY were a green, eye-blinding, dazzling stream. He poured them back into the sack, caressingly, and then again let them slide into a horny palm as though loving their touch. "Emeralds," he said again, softly and looked at Cort His eyes, however, were glittering.

Cort took one of the green stones and looked at it, examining it closely. The others lay in Sailor Morton's great paw. Colors hit the firelight, were reflected, and just for a moment it seemed that the rocks, the fire, the very night blackness surrounding them, appeared to take on a green hue. Red Calf stood motionless.

"Don't that damn Indian *ever* set down?" grunted the Sailor.

"Sometimes. He can rest standing.

He can also run a wild desert horse down and capture it by jogging after it day and night until it plays out." Cort reached into a pocket of his shirt and brought forth a magnifying glass. He said, squinting, quoting as though from a jeweler's book on precious stones. "A gem of pure green color. It is silicate of aluminum and a rare element known as beryllium. Only rubies and diamonds are considered more valuable. They are supposed to be either round or prismatic, with about six sides. Gravity is, for an average, approximately two and sixty-seven hundred. They originally came from Egypt and Ethopia."

He returned the stone, put away the magnifying glass. The Sailor sat with the bag in one hand, astonished. "Well, I'll be blowed," he ejaculated. "Valesquez said you were the sharp boy. I showed 'em to him because I knew you were smuggling diamonds and rubies, too, when he could get 'em; and, matey, you shoulda seen that Mex's eyes pop out like black buttons. He begged and wheedled, squeezin' his fat hands together 'til the palms squashed out like the belly of a red herring. But I wouldn't sell because I knew you'd probably get 'em anyhow; I brought 'em to you. Direct from Hong Kong."

"And with the blood of a hundred or a thousand men on them too, do doubt."

"Aw, now wait a minute. Cort! You got more brains than to be superstitious. Sure, they got blood on 'em. So's the gold you paid Garcia. Men died fer that gold—when they was washin' it out of the sands in California in '49, when it was took off stages by road agents, when it was lost over card tables an' follered by a knife in a slit throat. Now it's good minted U. S. coin. Men have always died fer anything of value. There's blood on it all. Sure there's blood on these. The boys on board got wind I had somethin'. Our stern wasn't hard down under the horizon from Hong Kong before a scum tried to knife me in me cabin. I fixed him plenty, I did. Shoved him through a port hole fer shark meat after I slit his gullet, and that Captain don't know to this day *exactly* w'at happened. We hit a breeze comin' around the Pacific circle and the old man laid on all the canvas she'd hold and let Sally run before the wind. And run she did, Cort. We made the west coast of Mexico five days ahead of sailing time. It was these gems. They brought us luck. How much?"

"Not interested," Cort lied. It was tyhe smuggler in him now speaking.

"How much?" insisted the Sailor.

"Not interested, I t o l d you. It's to turn in."

"Look here, Cort," half wheedled Sailor Morton. "I want to get back to the states with gold in my pockets. I hear a lot about this Arizona Territory. Gold and silver by the ton; gambling and beautiful w o m e n. Ahhh....that's fer me. You don't know what it is to appreciate a woman of any color, size or age 'til you've trod a deck few two months an' seen nothing but men an' sharks. These gems are worth a fortune. You take the profits you can get in the states. I want the feel of gold in me pockets when I hit across the line to the Territory."

They made the deal; forty-five thousand dollars in gold. Twenty-two hundred and fifty double eagles at twenty dollars apiece. $45,000.

Morton got up and went to his duffle bags, bringing out a bottle of rum. He swigged lustily, sighed, wiped his dirty beard, and offered the bottle to Cort, who shook his head.

"Time to turn in," the smuggler said, rising.

"Hey, don't I get my money?" the Sailor laughed protestingly.

"Not until in the morning. Gold *and* emeralds might prove too great a temptation to a man who seems to be pretty good at slitting throats with a knife."

"Hell, matey, I wouldn't try that on you."

Cort was at his blankets. He sat down to remove his moccasins again. He looked at the Sailor, and then

over to where Red Calf was getting between his own blankets. "I know you wouldn't," he said evenly. "That Apache sleeps like a cat and is just about as fast. If you make a move tonight, Morton, you'll find out that the Indians also know a little about slitting gullets. Leave your guns and knives over there on top of that rock. Make your bunk twenty feet away; you'll get your gold before day break in the morning."

"Haw-haw! So you *don't* trust me, eh?"

"Just about as far as I could throw one of those pack mules by the ears. Good night."

THEY GOT under way just at day-break. Red Calf rode ahead, leading the way on a blanketed Indian pony that wasn't much on looks but bred to the desert. Cort followed, leading the string of five pack mules, loaded with bolts of silk, the emeralds now nestling inside his shirt. He had been lucky in having the grey mule, much bigger than the others, which he'd bought in Tuscon. On it Sailor Morton brought up the rear, astride an improvised blanket-saddle Red Calf had rigged for him. There hadn't been a sack big enough or strong enough to hold the huge pile of gold coins, until Red Calf cut open his big burro skin water bag at one end and gave it to him. The sack, awkward to hold, was now in front of the man from the sea, across the big grey mule's withers. It made a pretty heavy load for the mule, but the Sailor stubbornly had refused Cort's suggestion to put the gold in a pack. Now Morton brought up the rear and swore salty oaths nearly every time the grey mule's feet touched the ground. He had no stirrups to help ease the weight off his seat. Red Calf, being an Indian, did not need any.

The Mexican desert stretched away in all directions into hazy distance too far for the naked eye to see; hot, sullen, resentful; greasewood and yucca studded. It drove northward to where, far in the haze, the *Oro Blanco Montes*—the White Gold Mountains—thrust sun baked ridges and humps into the desert sky. That was Arizona Territory over there across the line beyond the haze, and there they would camp for a few hours.

It was a desolate land of heat, a land of death, a land of renegade Apaches on raiding sprees off the San Carlos Reservation; a land where furtive-eyed horsemen holed up in gullies and arroyos and kept lookouts on high vantage points to warn of all comers. Here and there along creeks little settlements flourished, motley collections of 'dobie shacks whose occupants were mosty males. The few female inhabitants were Mexicans, dark-haired women of those who rode mostly by night.

The pack train moved on across the desert as the sun went higher. It was overhead now, throwing its hellish rays down upon the three riders and the plodding pack mules. Red Calf rode stolidly to the fore, his black eyes scouring every knoll, every bush, every gully. Back of the train Sailor Morton hitched at his heavy money across the withers of the grey mule, wiped sweat from his streaming brow, and swore at everything in sight.

Of the three Cort seemed to be the least affected, for this, he told himself, was his last trip. Johannes would give him a good twenty thousand profit on the emeralds. The years of hot hell as a borderman were coming to an end. She had laughed at him that night when he had returned from West Point, where upper-classman Hardy was finishing up his last year; the jeering laughter flamed in her carefree blue eyes; she had laughed hard when he asked her to marry him and come west.

"Profligate," was the word she had used.

And that had hurt. It had cut deep, seared him. It had burned the harder when she reminded him that he was not a man at all. He had first spent

his inheritance and then thrown away a good career in the Army for the pleasure of the cabarets.

Of course, she had been young then; only eighteen; daughter of rich parents, her father a financier. But when a man is young the hurt can cut deep in tender years, and now, though he had hardened, the shell was on the outside. The hurt was still within. A scar, and some kind of a grim determination, that had kept him going all these years. He had wanted money to come back to her and flaunt it in her face.

Childish, he had told himself a thousand times during the past six years. It was terribly childish to let a young girl's scorn put a scar on a man's heart.

Thought of what he had been brought a half smile to his face, more a quirk of the lips. He unconsciously looked down at the boots, spurs, the sheathed .44 that had killed three men, and compared this older Jim Cort with the younger James Van Cortland. There wasn't much to compare.

A grimace crossed his hard, taciturn face. Jim Cort, killer, suspected smuggler and badman, with a name along the toughest stretch of the border from Corpus Chisti to Mission San Diego.

The horse beneath him plodded on beneath the sun. The pack mules slobbered and kept slack rein up ahead. Red Calf rode on, watching, scanning. And for some strange reason Cort knew in that moment that it didn't mean anything anymore. He had, in a flash, outgrown it.

So she was in Tucson with her family?

All right, let her stay there. He had outgrown it now; the desert years had hardened him. He had come out of it a man. Perhaps not the type some people would have considered the epitome of what a real man should be, but Cort shrugged that one off. A man's fight must first be with himself; the fight had lasted six hard years in the desert, and he knew he had won.

SAILOR MORTON jolted up beside him, cursing again as he hitched at the heavy sack of gold coins in front of him, trying to keep it balanced on the withers of the big grey mule.

"Well, you wanted it," Cort grunted sourly. "You got it."

"How much longer, matey? Blow me, but my thighs on the inside feel like they've been scraped by a shark's teeth, and the damned sun is puttin' my eyes out. Now I know why you cow-wrastlers wear a big hat. How much further?"

"Not much. The Oro Blancos are there in the distance. We'll camp for a few hours and wait until dark to go on."

The Sailor grunted painfully and dropped to the rear again. The train wound on, working along the winding trails, dipping in and out of gullies and crossing ridges—but not until Red Calf signalled that all was clear.

Early in the afternoon they reached the Oros. They had swung a bit to the east to avoid crossing Papago country. The Papagoes were friendly enough, but Government agents were not; it was best to stick to the wild, barren country. They came at last to a kind of promontory, climbed it, but kept off the skyline. There was a big spring about two miles ahead where Cort planned to camp. Apache Springs, it was called. Red Calf went up the slope ahead to take a look, *hoo-oo-ing* his pony with digs of moccasined heels. He swung down, crawled up, and then Cort saw him duck back. His arm went up in signal.

"Oh, oh," called out Morton. "The bloody pirate's seen something."

He rode up and Cort handed him the reins of the lead pack mule. "Wait here I'll go up for a look. We may have to run for it. And shoot it out."

"Who do you reckon?"

"Anybody. Soldiers from the fort on patrol, renegade Apaches off the San Garlos reservation. Lon Pearson

and his raiders trying another ambush on me. I warned you, Morton. If there is trouble it's every man for himself."

"I heard you the first time," grunted the Sailor, taking the reins and twisting painfully in the improvised "saddle."

Cort gigged his horse up among the scattered greasewoods, sand and gravel rattling beneath its h o o f s. He pulled up alongside Red Calf's pony, swung down, removed his hat and crawled up beside where the Indian lay. Red Calf pointed silently.

Down in the next draw, about a quarter of a mile to the east mounted figures flashed out of sight in the thicker, greener brush, flashed up again, disappeared into another gully. Then came shots, the bawl of a cow in pain, and Red Calf looked at Cort and grinned the nearest wide grin possible in an Apache. Cort knew. The Government hadn't been too good about keeping its word with the Indians when it came to the matter of food. Grand old Cochise, who had died not too long before, had let his people go hungry for days to keep his word with white men who hadn't kept theirs.

Now it appeared that a raiding party was off the reservation. They had just run down and shot a cow.

"Your people?" Cort asked in Spanish.

Red Calf shook his head. *"De la Yanqui reservacion."* From the Yankee Reservation.

Renegades.

Cort lay there, pondering his next move. Had they been Sonora Apaches, Red Calf's outfit, he would have no cause for apprehension. But renegades were different. The pack train might prove too tempting.

It was then that Red Calf pointed again, toward the west, where a thin streamer of dust was rounding another promontory about a mile away.

"Soldados," the Indian said.

JIM CORT didn't have to be told; the dust shape was all too familiar. A cavalry patrol from Fort Huachuca. Cort lay there and cursed under his breath. The Indians were to the east of them, the patrol coming in from the west. They were caught almost between the two.

Cort slid down and rose to his feet, putting on his hat. His natural instinct was to turn and make a run south for it. But suppose the hungry raiders now working over the slaughtered cow also chose to run south, with the soldiers in pursuit? They might all be brought up together in one hell of a mixup. Yet if they ran *north,* the patrol would be sure to see them.

So Cort crawled up the crest and waited.

Sailor Morton came scrambling up on foot, panting and sweat streaked. "I had to get off that damned mule fer at least a minute or two," he panted. "What's up?"

"Where are the pack mules?" snapped Cort.

"Tied to a bush. What's up?"

Cort had unslung his glasses now. He focused them on the mouth of the gully. The Indians had dragged the cow back down to the mouth, possibly to where they could keep a sharp lookout. There were about a dozen of them, and the glasses brought them up close. They were sawing and hacking away, taking off big chunks of fresh, dripping beef. One of them had a fire going, but others were eating it raw. They could live on jackrabbits, lizzards, even rattlesnakes; but they evidently had ridden far and hard or the raiding had been poor. They were hungry.

Cort told the sailor, swinging around to view the oncoming soldiers.

"So we're caught between 'em, eh?" asked the Sailor. "And now it's every man for himself."

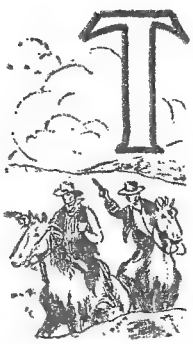
"Get back to the mules—and you'd better cache that gold someplace. It looks like we'll have to ride, and ride like hell."

"Right."

Morton slid back down the slope again to the pack train and Cort once more turned his attention to the problem at hand, pondering their next move.

He and Red Calf waited.

4



THE raiding party were still busy gulping food in big chunks. Thru the glasses Cort could see a buck stick a huge chunk of beef into his mouth, hold the rest with one hand, and saw off the bite in front of his lips. They wore vari-colored cloth headpieces, motley coats and shirts; a couple had on Levis, and all wore leggins and moccasins. Their bunched horses looked pretty good, probably the result of a night foray against the herd of some San Pedro or Santa Cruz River rancher.

Cort looked at Red Calf. The Indian had a carbine slung to his pony. He could signal them with a shot. But Apaches were a strange people in many ways; these raiders were *Yanquis,* not his own people; nor would it have made probably any difference. It was this part in the makeup which caused them to hire out to the soldiers as Apache police to help trail and run down members of their own tribe and even of their families. For a period of one year, as police, they trailed mercilessly, fought mercilessly, and shot mercilessly. The moment the tenure of service ended they faded back in the hills to join those they had hunted, taking with them every gun and every round of ammunition they could steal. By that time many of those they had hunted were now police, and the tables were reversed. The hunted became the hunter. The former police became the fugitives. It was a game they loved, an opportunity to ride and fight, and woe to the man who lost. It was none of their business that these strange *Yanquis* wanted to catch Geronimo because Cochise had been old and foolish and peaceable. The pay was good, and there was an opportunity to steal guns and ammunition.

Red Calf made no move to warn the busily gorging raiders.

"Do you know any of them?" Cort asked in Spanish, handing over the powerful binoculars.

The Indian took them, squinted, made adjustments on the lenses, and finally nodded. "Yes. There is Deer Tail, a very bad Indian from the reservation. He is a minor chief and is their leader. He is one of Geronimo's men. They are going to join him now."

"They'll join a lot of their brothers in the Happy Hunting Grounds in a damned few minutes unless they get goin," Cort grunted. "Hardy's men are coming closer. Why don't they see them?"

"They will find out. Let them fight."

It was indeed unusual for wild Apaches, even after life on the reservation, to be so incautious. Cort guessed it was because ravenous hunger had temporarily dulled their instinct for danger. He let it go at that. There was going to be one hell of a fight, and it was just possible that, during the confusion, he could get his pack train away unseen.

It took another half hour. By now the soldiers were close enough that Cort, hidden among the greasewoods at the top of the ridge, could make out quite clearly the features of Captain Hardy in the saddle. Hardy, old friend of the past, who had been finishing up at West Point as an upper classman the year Cort entered. He'd done quite well, no doubt about that. Promotions usually were pretty slow, tedious affairs....coming up from Second Lieutenant to First, and then to a Captaincy.

But Cort knew Hardy, a stern disciplinarian who followed the rules with the passion of a man who loves the rule book and the Army.

Finally Cort turned to Red Calf. "It's time to get out of here. If we get in trouble, you run for the camp. Don't fight and don't get shot. Do not fire on the soldiers. Understand?"

Before the Indian could nod a reply a sharp, shrill yell cut the air from down below to the east of them; an Apache yell of warning. Turbanned figures sprang into life, leaping for horses. A bugle blew. The cavalry column broke into a hard run, and so did Jim Cort. He leaped for his horse, spurred down the slope, rounded the corner where the train had been.

It was gone!

Sailor Morton had taken him at his word. In case of trouble, it was *every man for himself.*

MEANWHILE, two evenings before, some kind of military cyclone had hit the headquarters building in Fort Huachua. Colonel Eblen—known among the junior officers as "The Old Man" and among the troopers as "Colonel Blunderbus"—had called in Captain Lee Hardy. Hardy stood before him, thirty-one years of age, the perfect picture of the West Point trained officer; military, erect, and with that certain deference junior officers are expected to cultivate when standing before their superiors.

The Old Man was pacing the floor of his office, a cigar puffing furiously beneath his cropped grey mustache. He wheeled, removed the cigar, and pointed it at Hardy from between a stubby index and second finger.

"I want r e s u l t s, Captain," he snapped. "Results, you understand? You've been in the service long enough to understand what a chain of commands mean? The damned brass hats in their plush offices in Washington are bellowing like a bull in a cow pen about Apache depredations we can't stop, road agents, smugglers, and anything else that seems to come to their befogged minds. It is bad enough that the General now in command out here—an this is strictly off the record, Captain—spends most of his time lallygagging around trying to arrange a pow-pow with Geronimo, while at the same time he burns my shirt-tail for not *catching* him! All I'm supposed to do with about four hundred troopers is keep the Apaches on the reservation, stop the Sonora Apaches from crossing the line to join them on more raids, listen to the bawls of the Indian agent, protect stages carrying gold and silver from road agents like this ruffian Lon Pearson and his men, be careful not to cross the Mexican line and ruffle the tail feathers of the Mexican Government, maintain a fort with strict military discipline...."

He let the rest of the words trail off into growls past the cigar once more clenched between his teeth. The Colonel continued to pace the floor.

Hardy stood before him, at ease, and innerly a little comtemptuous. He was only a Captain now but he had come up fast. Once he got those Major's oak leaves and then a full Colonel's eagles on his shoulders there would be no apopletic outbursts like this.

Three passions consumed Captain Lee Hardy's life; promotion to a higher rank with its attendant responsibilities, wealth, and then Neely Anderson to become Mrs. Hardy. They occupied most of his waking hours and even his dreams. He wanted them, he could get them. The blueprint for the future was laid out, and nothing would be allowed to stand in his way. Nothing.

It was a maddening beat in his brain. He knew what he wanted. He would get it because the three meant everything in his life. Neely, at twenty-four, was one woman in a thousand. She was worth it. Any struggle, any sacrifice, any means...

"Yes, sir," he said.

The Colonel sat down back of his desk again. Something like a sigh, the sigh of a tired old man about to retire, came whistling out of his bulbous nose. "Captain Hardy," he said, "this whole country is making fools of the cavalry. We're trained men; we're efficient. Many older officers are veterans of the war between the states. We know fighting according to orthodox tactics, we know hardships in the field, we know military discipline. But we go out after these red devils and they fade away into

the desert and gullies like shadows. They simply disappear. They signal to each other with smoke miles away—miles before we can get there. We sneak up on them at night, a coyote yapps a couple of times, and they're gone again. We ride from daylight until dark—for what? To find the ashes of their campfire still warm; to make out a report to the damned brass hats that they've got away from us again. And all the time they're bellowing about results! So I want *results!*"

HARDY HAD stood, listening to it all. He knew there was little use in speaking until the Old Man got the steam off his chest. Now he shifted his saber and cleared his throat.

"Could the Captain make a suggestion to the Colonel, sir?" he inquired.

"What?" came back the snapped reply.

"A new tact, a temporary one, sir. Admittedly, sir, the Apaches have it on us and when it comes to stalking them on their grounds, even with the help of native police, whom I never trusted. We'll get them in time, sir—the Army always does. Meanwhile, this border is crawling with smugglers bringing in everything from jewels to alien Chinese. The big fellows, sir. The cunning ones. Men like this desperado who calls himself Jim Cort."

"Hmmm," commented the Colonel. "Go on, Captain Hardy."

"You've heard of Cort, sir?"

"I've heard of him. Some kind of a lone wolf smuggler and borderman. Educated. From back east, I believe. A former gentleman turned desperado. Clever man."

"Possibly because he spent a year at West Point, sir. I've known him since boyhood."

The Colonel leaned forward. He placed the cigar butt in an ash tray on his desk. His eyes weren't angered now; they were interested. He knew this capable officer now standing before him.

"Go on," Colonel Eblen said quietly.

Hardy went on. "He was a profligate, sir. Spent his inheritance, resigned from the Point because he did not like military discipline. Got into trouble over a girl who refused to marry him on account of his drinking and carousing. Came west and turned bad. Killed three men in gunfights, sir."

"And?"

"I caught him twice, but he was on his way south from Tuscon, and there was no evidence, as I wrote in my reports. But I know Cort—his real name is James Van Cortland, sir—and I know about where he makes his smuggling runs. So let us suppose that with the pressure on from Washington we did get some of the results you asked for? If we could pull in a man like 'Jim Cort' and turn him over to the United States marshal for prosecution, it might, sir, temporarily relieve the pressure now being put on us." Hardy was careful to use the word "us". "In brief, sir, it might help to stop this—er—rash in Washington. So suppose that I take out a patrol with plenty of provisions, ostensibly to hunt Indians but in reality to get this Cort or any more of his kind. It would show *results.* One captured smuggler with his pack train would look better on the reports than a half dozen sullen Indians returned under guard to the San Carlos Reservation."

Colonel Eblen got up. He relit the dead cigar, then looked at the younger man before him.

"Captain," he said levelly, "if you can bring me in just *one* smuggler's pack train within the next week or ten days, so I can have something to show to the General, I'll recommend you for a Major's commission and see that you get a two weeks leave from duty."

"Yes, sir," Captain Lee Hardy replied.

He went out, smiling to himself, crossing the compound to the officers' quarters. A man owed a duty to the Army, but he owed it first to himself. Let the Indians raid. He had

seen Cort four times on the trails, twice when he couldn't catch him, and twice when Cort was coming south with no evidence against him. That last time had been four weeks ago, when he had told the smuggler about Neely Anderson and her family being in Tuscon. Hardy thought he knew his man. And the Captain would, like the coyote hunter, the old time trappers, play on the habits of the hunted. Cort covered a thirty mile wide stretch of country on his trips to and from Tuscon, taking different trails each time. But soldiers stationed on ridges in pairs could signal with mirrors or spur to camp with information. It might take a week, ten days, three or four weeks...

Hardy sent for his orderly and told the man to have Lieutenant Kester report. Kester arrived within fifteen minutes.

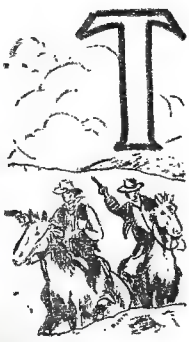
"Captain?" he inquired, saluting.

"Lieutenant," Hardy said to the slim young officer, "we're leaving at day-break. I want twenty-four of the hardiest troopers in the command, under Sergeant Toland. Hand picked men. Provisions for three to four weeks. I've just seen the Colonel, and he wants results. We're going to get them; we shan't come back until we do. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," replied the Lieutenant. He threw another salute with a gloved right hand, stepped outside, and was gone.

Hardy began inspecting his equipment.

5



THEY left the fort just as daylight turned the silent darkness of the fort to grey; out of the silent compound, answering the sentry's challenge, dropping down the slope, the Fort Huachuca Mountains looming up bold and dark in back of them.

They swung due west and rode hard all day long, camping that night on the banks of the Santa Cruz River. At dawn of the following day they crossed, hit the desert again, and drove on. Accoutrements rattled and squeaked. The horses' hooves rang out sharply on hard trails. Somewhere back of them came a song in trooper slang and with unprintable words as the trooper leading the heavily laden pack mules herded them along.

It was a hardy outfit; a tough outfit, well heeled and able to take care of any situation that might come along. It was led by a brilliant officer with bars on his dusty shoulders, tall and wiry and hard in the saddle. Lieutenant Kester rode beside him, an intelligent young officer upon whom Hardy could depend. Sergeant Toland, middle-aged, pot bellied, and crusty, was a top non-commissioned man who knew his business as well as he knew the desert. Toland had ridden with J.E.B. Stuart's men, saw the war lost, took his oath of allegiance to Lincoln's Government, and now was still in the Army he loved. Good men all.

They worked westward all that day, keeping a sharp lookout for tracks. Kester was privately of the opinion they should have brought along two or three Apache police, but he knew Hardy and he had wisely said nothing. Hardy's contempt for the Indians, his distrust of them probably stemmed from the fact that, when the final showdown came, white men must be accorded all credit.

That afternoon they pulled up to rest for a few minutes, drink thirstily from canteens, and stretch out saddle-kinks. They hadn't found a single track worth following. North of them, miles away into the haze, were the creeks, the rivers, the little settlements without name. Places where smugglers stopped over among those of their kind. Hardy made a sudden decision. He turned to Lieutenant Kester.

"I've been over this country before. Not a watering place for miles ahead. We'll swing back and make camp tonight at Apache Springs. Just a hunch I'm playing."

They swung up into saddles and the patrol got under way once more. Hardy instinctively edged them south toward the escarpments of the distant foothills, where his men would have the advantage of cover. He thought he knew his man. There had been no tracks of a mule pack train in two days. That meant Cort would be coming along in a week, two weeks....

They would proceed cautiously, play the waiting game with men in pairs strung out on high vantage points, and let the quarry fall into the trap.

Lieutenant Kester said nothing as they rode on hard through periods of the day when they should have been resting. He knew Hardy. He was still thinking about it that afternoon when the Captain threw up a gauntleted hand and brought the column to a halt. The sweaty mounts carrying dust covered riders stopped. Captain Hardy turned to Lieutenant Kester. He pointed up ahead to where mouths of omnious looking gullies and bold ridges showed in the distance.

"Noticed anything up there, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir."

"Just a movement. Looked like riders."

"Apaches?"

"I don't know. They slid out of sight."

"Orders, sir?"

"We'll continue forward," Captain Hardy answered crisply. "They're Apaches, I believe. Slid out of sight too quickly. If we contact them, the troop will give chase. But we're out for surer game this time."

Hardy started the column forward once more. Kester dropped back a pace, but not without the thought that it would have been better had they brought along some of the capable Apache police. Then he saw the distant haze of a smoke fire. Hardy was examining it through his glasses. They went on. A jackrabbit jumped up from beneath a greasewood, where it had dug a cool resting place in the shade, and went loping off out of sight. A buzzard sailed effortlessly in the sky, legs stretched out in the wind, repulsive red neck craning down in search of carrion. Hardy had been using his glasses again.

"About a dozen of the red devils, Lieutenant," he said. "Eating a butchered cow. I saw what I thought was movement atop one of the ridges. Probably one or two of their lookouts. Not much use trying to get around and cut them off. If they're heading for Mexico, they'll flee that direction. If they get uneasy, they'll streak northward for the reservation again. We'll go straight in and try to run them down. Pass the word along to shoot and shoot to kill."

THE DUSTY column broke into speed, the mule-tender whipping his packed mounts along to keep up. They drove straight for the canyon mouth; and the Apaches, their usual instincts blunted by hunger, let them get to within a quarter of a mile or so before the first shrill yell of warning cut the air. It carried far across the desert, telling that the patrol had been discovered. Figures began scurrying, running toward blanketed horses, and the troopers bored in at a dead run, some beginning to shoot from the saddle. The sounds of the single shot-45-70 Springfields broke out above the drum of running hoofs as the troppers, with Hardy at their head, tried to close in for the kill.

It was about then that, to the north, Captain Lee Hardy saw a slight movement, and not too far away. It was the tail end of a mottled black and white mule bobbing from sight down a draw. Hardy yelled a command to Sergeant Toland to pass on to Kester and wheeled away to the north, driving in the spurs. This was what he had been hoping for. Apaches didn't use mules when there was a good supply of horses handy. It might be a rider down there around the turn, but something about the bobbing rump told him it was a pack mule; he drove his cavalry mount forward with all the speed it could maintain.

Back of him the shots were still sounding, growing fainter in the distance. Hardy forgot them in the mission ahead. He reached the turn in

the gully where the mule's rump had disappeared, and some kind of a fierce, triumphant joy went through him at sight of the five running pack animals. He jerked his rifle free from its boot and began firing. He knew there was little chance of a hit while shooting from the back of a running horse; but his disappointment that the huge man leading them—a man with a rag around his head—was not Cort was alleviated by the knowledge, certain in his own mind, the man was a smuggler.

"Halt!" he bellowed, just because it would look good on his report, and fired again.

The rider dropped the rope on the lead mule. They plunged off to one side to come to a confused halt while the man ahead, astride a huge, grey mule, picked up more speed.

Hardy hauled his heaving mount to a halt. It was winded and trembling. He knew he could follow the man eventually and get him; and had it been Cort he would have killed his mount in the effort. But the big man with the rag around his head was a stranger, and the pack mules were there off to one side. Captain Lee Hardy rode over, picked up the now dangling rope on the lead mule, his eyes surveying with satisfaction the five sweaty animals. No prospector's outfit, this. No supply train for riders in desert line camps or sheep herders working the wilds with their bands of woollies. This was it. His luck was with him.

The Old Man had wanted results. Well....by Gawd! he was getting them; and Hardy knew in a moment of exultation that those oak leaves of a Major already were as good as on his shoulders. He led the hard panting animals back up the draw, rounded a corner, and came face to face with Jim Cort.

Cort's horse blocked the trail, Cort's hand close by his thigh where the sheathed .44 rested. Captain Hardy came to a halt.

He said, "Hello, Bert." The full name was Albert Lee Hardy, but during their boyhood days back east it had always been Bert.

"Hello, Jim," Hardy said. "I see your hand close by your gun. You probably intend to make an attempt to recover your pack train; don't do it."

"I didn't know you were chasing me, Bert," Cort answered sardonically. "I was so busy getting out of there when your men hit the Apaches that I didn't know *anybody* was chasing me."

Hardy recognized the sarcasm. It made his lips tighten. He realized now that his zeal, and a bit of bad luck, had caused him to defeat the very purpose he had set out to accomplish. Had he only waited, trailed the smuggler who had led the pack mules....

"Never mind the sarcasm," he snapped back. "I notice your horse is heaving a bit, as though he'd been running."

"It was time to run," Cort grinned at him.

"Or you could have been trying to catch up with your man."

"The only man I have," Cort answered truthfully, "is an Apache Indian helper I use for safe passage through this country, and sometimes as an interpreter."

"I know. I'm not a gambler, but I'd bet a month's pay that you even know where Geronimo is right at this moment."

"Don't make the bet," Cort advised him. "You might lose. I'm not saying, Bert. But it looks like you've made a haul."

HARDY HAD twisted around in the saddle, doing it gradually in the hopes he could get open the flap of his holster. Cort saw the movement and his grey eyes went cold.

"Don't be a damned fool," he said sharply. "Don't try to throw that gun on me, Bert; I'd drop you cold."

"I've got men up there not far south. If they heard the shot you'd never leave this country alive."

Cort shrugged his slim, square shoulders. "You're the man who was going for his gun," he reminded.

"I'll still go for it if you try to recover this pack train!" Sharply.

"Possession is nine points in law, I believe," Cort answered dryly. "It

looks like you've captured a pack train of contraband. Even though there are no witnesses present, and I could easily shoot you and take it, I wouldn't deny you the pleasure of making out a good report to the Colonel and then, modestly, telling Neely about it when you see her again. Old school ties, you know. The Point and all that, even though you were an upper classman and I only a plebe."

Hardy's iron control gave way under the bitter sting of irony. "Damn you, Jim, I ought to arrest you and take you in."

"Try it," grinned Cort. "If you do, Bert, you'll never live to make that report."

He gigged his horse on past Captain Hardy and the pack train and rode on down the trail, leaving the fuming officer staring after him. "Good old Bertie," Cort grinned again, to himself. "I'd like to be watching through an open window when he tells Neely all about it."

He rode on, smiling sardonically. He did not look back.

6

THE Santa Cruz—Saint Cross—River is just east of the Oro Blanco Mountains and runs a course almost north and south toward Tuscon, passing the old city just a bit to the west. It wasn't much of a river, even then. It was more a wet streak of sand, except during rain storms, when the yellow waters hit the bends in a rage and tore great gashes out of the sandy banks. It created bluffs, always crumbling, to a height of thirty feet.

It was back from one of these bluffs that Lon Pearson and his raiders had their little settlement.

The place consisted of about a dozen one and two room adobe shacks, set back in a grove of big cottonwoods. Here Pearson lived alone in the largest of the edifices. Scattered around in whatever locations took their fancy were the cabins of his men and their Mexican women. It was headquarters, where law was Lon Pearson's word and their six shooters. There wasn't a sheriff within nearly one hundred miles, and this suited the raider and his men. On that score they had no complaints. From the settlement they rode out on forays, sometimes to steal horses from the ranchers, sometimes to rob stages, often to go into Tombstone, Bensen, and old Tuscon to get drunk on the proceeds of a raid and toss their money over the gambling tables and to the girls for temporary favors.

They had just held up the Benson stage the day before, leaving one man behind. A man called "Pancho."

Pancho was the offspring of a wild Apache father and a Mexican mother, mingling native Mexican intelligence with the cunning of his father. He had lived with the Apaches and spoke his father's language as well as he did his mother's. He was the best trailer in the outfit, an asset Lon Pearson valued very much when they went out looking for smuggler pack trains. He could cover a trail as only an Apache could do it—hence the reason Pearson always left him behind. By the time a posse of befuddled citizens, outraged though they might be, arrived at the scene of a stage holdup there simply were no tracks; Pancho had covered them.

Thus Lon Pearson awoke that afternoon about two o'clock, and in a savage frame of mind. The holdup had netted but six hundred dollars from passengers, there being nothing in the strongbox. Nothing else of value except a couple of mail sacks, which the raider was too intelligent to touch.

It had taken five men to pull the job, and the proceeds hardly had been worthwhile, in keeping with the risk involved. The five had played poker until four in the morning, and Pearson had lost his share to Pancho, the winner. Pearson didn't mind the loss of the money. It was the fact that, being a chronic drinker who kept a bottle alongside his bed and drank during waking spells, his nerves were

on edge all the time. There was that constant strain of knowing that someday they'd run into a U.S. Marshal, a patrol of soldiers, a night guard at one of the ranches, a decoy stage armed to the teeth with "passengers," or a smuggler train guarded by men with carbines.

Pearson took a large swig out of a quart bottle and went outside to the wash basin on a bench beside the doorway. He soused his blond locks, straightened his wide-shouldered frame, and towelled his handsome face. There was a cracked mirror hanging from a nail driven into the adobe wall, and he surveyed his countenance with little satisfaction. His eyes were getting a bit bloodshot, he noted, and there was a slight puffiness beneath them of late. Only hard riding kept him, at twenty-nine, lean and hard. It was his one insurance against quickly going to seed.

He cooked a breakfast of bacon and flapjacks, lounged around under the cottonwoods, moodily contemplating that it was time to retire and settle down to an honest living. A man with his money ought to be able to buy a pretty good ranch along the river—something like the Batton place—and make it pay. They could still hold up an occasional stage, pick off a rich smuggler pack train, and sell the goods to Johannes Bruckman for a fat profit.

PEARSON was still thinking it over that afternoon when the stranger rode into camp aboard a big grey mule and pulled up right in front of where the outlaw leader sat whittling a piece of dry cottonwood stick. Lon Pearson stared at the newcomer. The newcomer slid to the ground, cursing salty oaths, and gave the grey mule a good kick in the belly to vent his spleen.

"Blow me!" he said disgustedly and walked spraddle legged toward the bench. He sat down painfully and stretched out his great legs with the rippling muscles, let go a sigh of relief, and completely ignored the man with the knife.

"Blow me, matey!" he said again.

"Who're you?" the outlaw leader asked curtly.

"Sailor Morton, matey, just in from the China Seas. Wisht I'd stayed on the *Sally Ann.*"

Pearson's eyes took in his great figure and dress, the two pistols and three knives in the wide leather belt. He had never seen a man like this one. "What are you doing here?"

Sailor Morton removed the rag around his head and used it to wipe away sweat. He looked at the rag, not at Lon Pearson.

"It's a hell of a country," he remarked. "Every time you turn around somebody is asking what are you doing here. Like that bloke Jim Cort. I come into his camp—"

Pearson had tossed away the stick. He was all ears now. He said sharply, "Go on and tell it."

Sailor Morton told him. Pearson, realizing the man's pain, went inside and brought out the partly empty bottle. The Sailor drank lustily, and finished his story.

"So that's how it is, matey. Them damn sojers hit the Indians an' this Jim Cort, the smuggler, said as how it was every man for himself, so I took the pack train and set full sails down the canyon. Figgered I'd sell the stuff and then come back and get my gold. Next thing I knowed this bloke officer with a rifle opens up on me an' I have to hit her in a full breeze with all sails set, leaving the cargo behind." He spat, drank from the bottle again, and looked at Pearson. Then his eyes roved around the clearing, saw the adobe shacks with their busy Mexican women. "This don't look like no sailors' mission in Singapore," he finished. "Now you do some talking."

"I'm Lon Pearson," the raider chief said, and told nothing more. "My men here are—sort of traders. But I know your Jim Cort. Sixty Chinese, you say?"

"Ay."

"That's fine. We'll bring them in." He rose and let out a shout. "Oh, Smitty! Smitty!" He turned to the Sailor. "Smith is my segundo, or second in command," he explained.

"I speak the language, mate," Sailor Morton said.

"Good. I'll send Smith—here he comes now."

Smith came at a fast walk through the shade of the cottonwoods. The Mexicans called them "Alamo" trees. The segundo was short and bow-legged with a short black beard. He was in his forties.

"Smitty," Pearson said, "we've got a visitor here in Sailor Morton." The two men shook hands. "Garcia's got sixty Chinese aboard a schooner in the Gulf, with no takers. I want you to get some of the boys and go after them. Garcia don't know you, so I'll have to give you a note to him. Tell him it's from Jim Cort and that he's changed his mind about those Chinese. He'll run them up the river on flatboats to Cort's camp. Morton here will show us where it is."

"Hold it, matey!" protested the Sailor. "I wouldn't make that ride back again for all the Chinese in China."

"We've got a saddle you can use. Belonged to one of our men Cort killed a few weeks back when we tried to ambush him. You can make it. So Cort disappeared for thirty minutes to get the gold he paid you? Pancho can find his cache. We'll wait in Cort's camp, take his cache and delivery of the Chinese, and then we can pick up your money on the way back, Sailor."

THE MAN of the sea looked at him, teeth bared through the beard in a cunning grin. "And then slit my gullet after you found my coin? Oh, no, matey; you'll have to do better than that. That coin is Sailor Morton's. You send your men for the heathens. Just tell Garcia to bring them to Jim Cort's camp. I'll stay here and rest up a few days."

"You'll go with us," the raider said, and it was final. He turned to Smith. "Get your boys rolling and hit for the gulf, whatever men you think you will need. Pick up them Chinese—one hundred dollars a head, cash in advance—and take them up the Conception to Cort's camp. Get some man of Valesquez's to guide you. Make Garcia do it, if necessary. We'll be waiting for you in Cort's hidden camp. He's on his way to Tucson to sell some jewels and won't be back fer awhile. Savvy?"

"Yep," Smith answered. "All clear. But why couldn't we bring 'em straight across from the Gulf?"

"Because you might get picked up by patrols. They're thicker over that way. And because we're going to raid Jim Cort's camp and pick up his cache of money. Pancho ought to be able to find it. It'll pay fer that one man we lost and that burn you got across the hip. Get going."

AN HOUR later Smith and five picked men rode out of camp, heading across the desert. They had a string of nine pack mules, loaded down with provision. No riders for the sixty Chinese. They would pay one hundred dollars apiece to get into Arizona—and walk every foot across the desert.

Sailor Morton drank more of the whiskey and went to sleep in a spare bunk in Lon Pearson's cabin. The afternoon wore on and night fell. Men ambled through the darkness from one cabin to another, talking and chatting. Their dark-eyed women sat in little groups and talked in Spanish. From somewhere in the distance came the bleat of a milk goat. The night wore on, and Sailor Morton, unused to riding, slept.

The camp came alive just before daybreak. Morton came out of his bunk, stiff legged and swearing. He and Pearson ate a breakfast of flapjacks and salt pork plus eggs from the chicken pens of one of the Mexican women, and saddled horses appeared out of nowhere.

The Sailor swung up. The saddle with its stirrups felt much better. He was still thinking of his gold. He was cursing the bad luck that had lost him Jim Cort's stolen pack train.

They got under way shortly before sunup—five men; Pearson, Sailor Morton, and three of Pearson's raiders leading pack mules loaded down with water and provisions for a long ride across the desert.

The Sailor's muscles had lim-

bered up a bit by now; but he was still thinking of his gold, and he did not trust Pearson. The raider seemed to read his thoughts as they rode side by side. "If you're worrying about that money, then forget it," he finally observed. "I play fair and square with my men. You're one of them, if you want to join. Nobody steals from anybody else in this outfit."

"Fair enough, matey," the Sailor said. "I'm your man."

They rode on, came to the place where the seaman had lost the pack train to the Army officer, passed it and went on. Morton pointed ahead.

"Up there in them canyons is where the fracas started," he said. "Them sojers hit the Indians and I got away with the pack train while they was fightin' an' shootin'. I hid my gold up there under some rocks."

"No use in packing it all the way south and then back again," Pearson said. "We'll pick it up on the return trip. Let's go over and see what kind of a fight they had."

They swung over to where the Apaches had been eating the shot down cow. It still lay there, partly skinned with big chunks of meat cut out of its hips and back. The blow flies were at it, and the carcass was odorous, starting to swell.

"There's one of 'em," Pearson said, and pointed. They rode over.

The Apache had been shot squarely through the backbone and lay where he had fallen. The men began to circle. They found five more bodies where they had fallen.

"Twelve or thirteen you said," Pearson speculated. "That means the soldiers got about half of them before the others got clear. Maybe they went south. If they did, we might run into 'em. Look around, boys, scatter out and follow tracks."

Presently a man came loping back. He hauled up beside where Pearson and Morton lounged in their saddles. "They swung north—about six of 'em," he said. "Headin' hell bent back to the reservation. We follered the tracks of their hosses—the ones who didn't git away. From the tracks it looks like the soldiers caught their hosses an' took 'em back to the fort."

"All right," the raider said. "Get the boys together and we'll go on."

They got under way, and within a few minutes came to the place where the pack train had stopped. Morton hauled up and went down the slope on foot. Pearson heard a roar of frustrated rage and looked up to see his new man coming back.

"Gone!" Sailor Morton was bellowing, waving his huge arms. "My money's gone! Maybe Cort—maybe the sojers—maybe them bloody Indian pirates, I don't know. *But my gold is gone!*"

7

RED Barton, the stage driver on the Tuscon to Tombstone run, collected his pay in the Wells-fargo office that afternoon about two and tucked the gold coins and silver into a pocket with a grin. He was a forty years old man, squat and powerful and devoted to his wife and three children. It was a ritual with him that on paydays he would stop off and buy a present for his wife and what he called the "muchachos," his three boys. He took off his hat and scratched with a horny hand at his thick shock of flaming hair.

"You know, of course," the clerk said, "that you'll be making the Tombstone run in the mornin'?"

"Hell, I ought to," Red grinned. "With all them gamblers an' sportin' women and the rest of 'em loadin' down the old hack every trip in to get rich in thet camp. Near wears my teams out in this hot weather. Ast the boss when he's goin' to git me some decent hosses," and Red grinned again.

"*You* ask him!" retorted the clerk. "I like this job and I ain't aiming to be fired off it. We got the best hosses in the country and you know it."

"What've we got lined up for in the mawnin'?"

The clerk picked up a sheet of paper. "Let's see. You got one gent who looks like an eastern drummer, going to Fairbanks. Then you got three more—some important looking easterner, his wife, and their daughter, down to Vail. Name's Anderson."

"Easterners!" snorted Red disgustedly. "All I haul is easterners anymore. They groan an' they grouch about the heat, the dust, the grub at the relay stations, an' one dam' fool swore a mosquito bit him—in the middle of the day at a hundred and ten in the shade. I told the fool it was a horsefly. What'n the blue blazes is this bunch of doods stoppin' off in Vail fer? There ain't a hotel or roomin' house there. Nothin' but a store and one saloon."

"From what I hear he's a big rich gent come west to retire. They're buying the Batton ranch down on the Santa Cruz. Batton is meeting them there to pick them up."

"Hah!" snorted Red. "A fee-nancier punchin' cows, chasin' Pearson's gang when they steal his horses, an' not afraid of the Apaches off the reservation, eh? Hah!" he snorted again.

"Well, we get paid for it," the clerk said.

Red left the office and went out through the compound. Beneath the sheds were a half dozen stage coaches, and one of them was having its wheels greased. That was the one he was taking out in the morning. Red went through the gate, turned into the street, and presently came into Johannes Bruckmann's big store. He ought to be able to find something special for his wife. The stage driver went into its cool, adobe interior and then hauled up short at sight of Jim Cort. He went over and shook hands.

"Hello, Jim," he grinned. "Ain't seen you in a month of Sundays. How is it goin'? Just get in?"

"Last night," Cort said. "How's the stage business?"

"Same old grind," grunted Red. "Roll 'em along the road, bawl at 'em, bust 'em on the rumps with a whip, and watch out for road agents and Apaches. How long you stayin' with us?"

"Leaving in a few minutes," Cort replied.

"I'm goin' out on the Tombstone run in the mornin'," Red said. "Drop over that way sometime, Jim, and I'll buy you a drink."

"That's a promise," Cort smiled, and went out.

Red went back to make his purchases from Bruckmann—a big bearded man with a hook nose—and went on home.

HE RETURNED to the compound the following morning shortly before seven, carrying canteen and a rifle. One of the hostlers already had the two wheelers in line and another was bringing up the two leaders at a trot. Red went inside, checked over the passenger list again, and the clerk slid over a piece of paper. Red signed for the strongbox and the mail sacks. He glanced over his passengers. The little man in the derby hat and the three others. The Andersons. He saw a big, important-looking man in his fifties wearing a new broad brimmed Stetson hat, a motherly-looking woman somewhat younger, and the prettiest girl he had ever laid eyes upon. He was used to pretty passengers, most of them dancehall girls. But this one had flaming red hair like his own, and the bluest eyes he had ever seen. He heard her say to the older man," "Father, I'm so excited I can hardly wait. Think of it. Living on a ranch where it's nice and quiet."

Her father smiled patronizingly.

"That w o u l d n 't, by coincidence, have anything to do with the fact that Captain Hardy is stationed at Fort Huachuca, would it, Red-head?"

"Father!" she exclaimed, and actually blushed.

The man in the derby came over, importantly. "Driver, what time do we get to Fairbanks?" he demanded.

Red looked him over with a critical eye. "Thet's about hundred and five to hundred and ten miles, mister. We average about ten miles an hour —barrin' such things as hold-ups,

Apache raiders, busted axles, loose tires, an' limpin' horses."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the other. "Hold-ups ! Does it happen often?"

"Nope," Red said complacently. "Not often. It's been all of a week or ten days since Pearson an' his gang hauled me up a few miles outa Bensen an' got the drop on Ace there."

Ace's shadow had blocked the doorway in the early morning sun. He was a blank-faced man of about twenty-five. He wore criss-crossed cartridge belts around his waist supporting two guns in holsters. He carried a double-barrelled shotgun in one hand and a repeating rifle in the other.

"They're ready to roll, Red," he said tonelessly.

"All right," Red said. He turned to the four passengers. "All right, folks. The baggage has been loaded an' lashed down an' we're all set. If you will take yore seats, we'll get outa here."

He went over and hauled the strongbox to a shoulder, picking up the two small mail sacks beneath his other arm. Ace was already up in the driver's seat. He hauled up the strongbox and the sacks. A hostler stood holding the bridles of the leaders. Red went up over the hub, reached down and took the lines from the second hostler, and bent to peer down at his passengers.

"All set, folks?"

"All set," answered the voice of Neely Anderson.

"Turn 'em loose!" Red yelled and tightened the lines. The four hit the traces with a snap and the stage jerked forward.

The Tombstone run, across one hundred and twenty miles of desert, was under way.

IN THE COACH Neely sat beside her mother as the town fell behind and the desert began. In the distance she soon made out the green belt of the Santa Cruz River—the river on which her new home was to be. Batten and her father had talked things over in Tuscon, and now they were going out to look over the place and close the deal. She thought she was going to like it out here. Ever since Lee Hardy had come west, serving at various forts before being assigned to Hauchuca, he had written her endless letters. On his last trip back east he had told her of the newly established fort, and asked her to marry him. She didn't know yet why she had asked him to wait awhile longer until she could make up her mind. She thought of those early days, of people she had known, of James Van Cortland who also had wanted to marry her. She had wondered many times what had become of Jim. He had never written after that night she had laughed at him, jeered at him; called him a profligate. Somewhere deep down inside of her was a tinge of regret over that action on her part. It had been an injustice, and she was frank enough to admit it to herself. She knew only that he was somewhere out west here in this country. Captain Hardy's last letter had mentioned that fact: that Jim was a desperado, a gun fighter, a smuggler.

She reached into her bag and pulled out his last letter, reading it again as the stage rocked on. It had been posted to her in Tucson two weeks before.

"Don't tell me you're reading that letter again—that one from Bertie?" her mother asked.

"There's nothing else to do," Neely laughed. "And, mother, you mustn't call him Bertie anymore, like he asked you not to. He's Captain Hardy now."

"He might be Captain Hardy to the others, but he'll be Bertie to me even if he becomes a major or a general or something."

"He's expecting to be promoted to Major, he said. But I'm astounded that he ran into Jim Cort out here."

"'Jim Cort,'" sniffed her mother. "A young man from one of the best of families who couldn't live up to tradition. A hard drinker and a profligate who threw away a good career in the Army. And now no better than a common stage robber."

Neely had read parts of the letter to her parents.

She put the letter away again, and

the stage rolled on. They made the first way station in an hour and thirty minutes, covering fifteen miles. Red climbed down from his seat and handed the lines of the four sweaty horses to a hostler. He came over and opened the door of the coach.

"We'll be here about ten minutes, folks," he said. "Better go inside and stretch yore legs. We'll be rolling again as soon as we git a fresh change of hosses."

They got out and crossed over to a porch with its welcoming shade. A young Mexican woman came to meet them—wife of one of the hostlers. "Welcome," she said in fairly good English. "The rooms for you are out there, senoras. I have the coffee and beer and water for you to drink."

Presently Neely came back onto the porch. The heavily armed Ace stood beside the doorway, smoking a cigarette. Neely went up to him.

"How long have you lived out here, guard?" she asked.

"All my life, ma'm," he said.

"I guess you know a lot of people."

"Tol'able."

"Did you ever hear of a man named Captain Hardy, at the fort?"

"Seems like I heard the name, ma'm."

He was aloof, cool, indifferent. This was old stuff to him.

"What about this man named Jim Cort?" she asked, trying to make it sound casual.

"I've heard of him," was the reply.

Red had come onto the porch. The hostlers were jumping another four into place in front of the stage and working over trace chains. She turned to Red.

"Have you ever seen this Cort?" she asked.

Red was rolling a cigarette, getting in a few last puffs before they got under way again. He licked the brown paper and stuck it in a corner of his mouth.

"Just heard of him, ma'm," he said.

It was a rebuff and she knew it. These westerners were a strange breed. She'd heard that you weren't supposed to ask questions. "You folks better git loaded," Red said.

THEY CLIMBED back inside and took their seats while Red checked his wheels and the axles. He went up over the right hub and Neely heard his yell at the four. The coach jerked forward and the station disappeared in the dust behind. The sun rose higher and it grew hotter. More dust than wind came in through the open windows but Neely saw the look of discomfiture and disgust on the drummer's face and smiled. He had tried to make conversation with her but had soon given it up as a bad job; she wasn't interested. Her thoughts were, for some strange reason, wrapped up in two men, and she had the equally strange premonition that she would see both of them within another month.

It was while she was looking out across a nearby arroyo that she saw the head with a red rag around it appear back of a raised rifle. The gun crashed in the Apache's hands and a scream broke from Mrs. Anderson as Ace's body tumbled past the window.

The stage leaped forward like a thing alive, Red's roar to the horses coming with the slashing pops of his whip. "Git!" he was bellowing. "Git outa here. Run you sons of—like you never run before!"

"Neely!" screamed Mrs. Anderson. "Get your head back inside. You'll be shot!"

"I want to see it before I do," she shouted back.

The stage was shooting along the flat road, the horses at a dead run. Back of it she saw seven wild, fierce looking men digging moccasined heels into the sides of their ponies. Fear chilled her to the marrow as she saw the ocre paint streaks below their cruel eyes. The dark faces were triumphant. They were shooting now, but apparently not at the stage. They were shooting at Red. Two of the bucks, better mounted than the others, had swung out on each side and were gradually drawing up abreast. Red was holding the lines in one hand now, firing his pistol with the other. He crippled the horse on his right, but the rider on his left had still come up to the fore, and was closing in closer to the lumbering stage for a

better shot, knowing Red couldn't reload his pistol. His high pitched yell of triumph sent ice into the passengers.

Then Neely Anderson saw a sight that forever live in her memory. That of a rider astride a long legged, desert bred horse come up out of an arroyo leading a pack mule. He dropped the rope and the horse shot forward. The rider bent down, swooping back up again with a repeating Winchester in his hand. He came in at a dead run, the horse's belly low above the ground, slashing a path through the greasewoods, straight at the hard spurring Apache closing in toward the left front wheelers where Red cursed as he frantically tried to use his Winchester with one hand.

Never had she seen such a magnificent figure of man and horse as that hard running gelding came galloping towards them with bushy mane flying, the lean figure of the rider sitting with reins across its neck, the rifle in both hands.

He was thirty yards away when Neely recognized him and a strange cry broke from her. It was then with her cry of "Jim Cort. *Oh, Jim, Jim, Jim!*" that the Apache saw him. The buck tried to swerve, to throw up his gun, and their horses almost collided as Cort swung the barrel of the repeater. It caught the Indian just in back of his head and crushed his skull.

Cort hit the ground and was down on one knee in a flash. The repeater went up and began to crash. Bullets from riders on running horses fifty yards away threw up dirt spurts all around him. They broke to circle him, and never completed the circle because Jim Cort killed all five of them with five shots. The riderless horses went loping away into the greasewood, and Cort rose. The stage had swung around and Red was loping them back. He hauled up in a cloud of dust and grinned pantingly.

"Jim," he panted. "I'll buy you *two* drinks next time I see you in Tombstone."

But Cort didn't see or hear. He stood frozen, something hard gripping him inside, as he found himself looking straight into the eyes of Neely Anderson.

8

SHE REMOVED his hat as she and the others got out of the coach, and she saw a face that was the same as of old and yet different; an older face that had been burned to a light bronze by years beneath desert suns; she saw brittle eyes with no emotion in them, the heavy pistol at his hip, the big rifle in his left hand.

"Why, if it isn't James Van Cortland!" gasped out Mrs. Anderson with a sharp intake of breath. "Jimmie! After all these years."

Red sat on the box, staring. He removed his hat, scratched with one finger, put it back on.

Cort said, "How are you, Mrs. Anderson. Mr. Anderson, glad to see you again, sir. You're looking well, Neely."

That was all; cold and blank, the words without emotion. It was as though the years along the border had dried all of it from his body.

Anderson shook hands eagerly. Mrs. Anderson prettied. Neely came forward and extended a slim hand. "Jim, I—I don't know what to say. These Apaches—"

"Driver," called the excited drummer, "I'd like to go out and look at one of those Indians this man killed."

"Mister, we got another man down the road about a quarter or half mile who ain't an Indian we got to look at," came the reply. "Get back in. They got Ace, Jim; shot him off the box from an arroyo. Don't know whether he's dead or not. Wish you'd go down and see while I bring the stage on. Get in, folks. Hurry it up."

They got back in and Cort went loping ahead. He found the body of Ace beside the road and swung down. One look at the shotgun guard told

him that Ace had ridden his last ride. He had been shot through and through with a 45-70 Springfield, the owner of the gun having taken it from the fort when he finished his tenure of one year as an Apache policeman. A feeling of regret went through Cort; he had liked Ace. Cort got his mail in care of Red, in Tucson, and it had been Ace who had, between Vail and Benson, climbed down and disappeared into an arroyo to leave letters beneath a big flat rock. They had laughingly referred to it as Cort's "rural mail box."

The stage hauled up beside him and Red set the brake and climbed down. Neely got out again, followed by the others. She stifled a shudder as she looked down at the dead man.

Cort said, "He's dead, Red. The ball went clean through him and tore out a big hole. Looks like a 45-70."

"Probably a damned Apache police with a stolen Army gun," Red said savagely. "I'd like to kill every one of the—" and he finished a word that made the women's ears burn. "We've made eighty-three runs together between Tucson and Tombstone, and there never was a better shotgun guard—even if Lon Pearson's gang did git the drop on him once. Damn it to hell!" and he swore again. "He always liked you, Jim."

Neely Anderson stood there, listening to it all and stifling those shudders. She understood now that blank, hard, emotionless expression on "Jim Cort's" face. So this was what this raw, wild border country could do to a man? It had seemed only minutes ago that she had asked the dead guard if he knew Jim Cort. And he had said, quietly and with that certain aloofness in his voice, "I've heard of him."

"I always liked Ace, too," Cort said, and put on his hat. He looked at the driver. "Well, Red, I guess I'd better go out and round up those Apache horses and try to return them to their rightful owners."

"All right, Jim. I'll take the tarp off the baggage and lash him on top and take him on into Tombstone. He's got some folks somewhere around here. I'll try to git in touch with 'em."

Cort mounted again, and as he rode off Neely saw that he was shoving fresh shells into the magazine of the rifle before returning it to the top, where he lashed it down. They drove back to the place where Cort had killed the five Apaches and went out to look. Neely saw dead men for the first time; wild, savage looking men with lateral streaks of paint beneath the eyes and across their noses. Faces fierce even in death. Cort came back leading his own pack animal and six horses that had belonged to the raiders. He removed the blanket saddles and tossed them aside while the others stood looking down at the body of a large, well built buck.

"That's Deer Tail," Cort said to Red. "He was a minor chief and friend of Geronimo. They broke off the reservation a couple of weeks ago, him and about a dozen others, on a raiding spree south and heading for Mexico to join Geronimo."

"He's in Mexico now?" Red asked.

Cort nodded. "I saw him down there several days ago. He said he was willing to have a talk with the soldiers, if they'd give him a square deal and listen to his complaints. Anyhow, Deer Tail hit south, and ran into a patrol of Hardy's men while they—the Indians—were eating a shot down cow. Hardy and his men got about half of them and the others headed north again, supposedly for the reservation. But they've been raiding and stealing horses, and raising hell in general, before they went back. That crack at the stage probably was a final spree before they burned the breeze back, all innocence."

"Well," Red grunted in satisfaction, "they won't be raidin' off the reservation no more—not this bunch," and turned as sound came from behind. "Well, I'll be damned! Here come the cavalry—late as usual."

THERE WERE about a dozen of them, and Cort stood stony-faced as he recognized Hardy. One of the troopers led two pack mules. They were dusty, tired looking, their mounts sweaty. Neely Anderson gave a sudden cry.

"Mother! Father! Look, it's Bert."

It was Hardy, all right, and the first thing Cort noticed was that he wore the insignia of a major on his dusty blue shoulders.

Hardy had led his captured pack train back to the scene of the fight, and waited until his men had come straggling in, after the running fight. The success of the patrol had exceeded his wildest imagination. They had been out two days and got a rich pack train and killed several Apache raiders. He had curbed his impatience to get back to the fort and report to the "Old Man," and the reaction had fulfilled his expectations. The General had come in, and Bert had been promoted to the permanent rank of a Major on the spot. They had wanted him to take over an administration job, at a desk, but this he had skillfully declined. He wanted to be in the field, to make combat reports, to get quicker promotion enabling him to wear those covetted eagles on his shoulders, and to see Neely. For his now daily letters to her in Tucson, sent by the Military post mail to and from Tucson each day, had brought the information that they were buying the Batton ranch. It would be easy, in the field, to drop by that ranch at regular intervals, sometimes to "rest" up his men overnight while he spent his time with her and the family.

The new Major Hardy had asked for, and received, permission to hit out again with a compact dozen men to run down those remaining raiders or drive them back to the reservation. He had been hot on their trail when he and his men topped the ridge and saw the motionless stage coach.

Hardy rode up. The first person he saw was Neely, and then Jim Cort, and a dead Indian. He didn't know why, but something told him that Cort had killed that Indian. That meant a raid on the coach, and Hardy tightened his stomach.

He pulled up, still the stern disciplinarian, and his gauntleted hand went up in salute to Neely and her folks before he swung down.

He went to Neely first, and without hesitation swept her into his strong arms and kissed her. It was a bold thing to do; bolder than he ever would have tried under other circumstances. But Cort was there, Hardy felt the weight of the new oak leaves on his shoulders, and the gesture was a possessive one.

"Bert!" she gasped out, freeing herself. "Bert.... I—where did you come from?"

"We were trailing these raiders," he said. "We'd have got them in a few more hours," this for her benefit. He knew he had arrived too late.

He was shaking hands with her parents, his hat off. Cort stood by the horses, calmly smoking a cigarette. His eyes said nothing. Neely thought she caught a look of contempt in them. Red had, instinctively, gone back up over a wheel and was in the driver's seat.

Hardy looked at Cort. He was all officer now, aware of Neely's presence. "You kill these Indians?" he asked curtly.

"Yes," Cort said.

"You can consider yourself under Military arrest pending an investigation as to the murder of Apaches technically at peace and wards of the United States Government."

"I notice you said *you* were chasing them," Cort said.

"That's a military job, not covered by civil regulations," was the curt reply. "That's our job."

"You didn't seem to be doing so good at it when they killed the stage driver's shotgun guard off the coach and attacked it," Cort sneered.

"That matter will be taken care of through channels. Men, take that smuggler into custody," Major Hardy ordered.

FROM ATOP the stage came that peculiar mechanical sound of a rifle cartridge being jacked fast into

the firing chamber. Red sat there, not covering Hardy, the repeater merely being pointed downward. The troopers saw it, and hid secret grins. They made no move in the face of Hardy's orders; this was something he'd have to handle himself.

"Arrest him!" Hardy snapped out to his men.

"I don't think, Mister Hardy," came Red's voice, "that they'd better try it."

"Why?"

"Because the moment they try it I'm going to blow the top of yore head off with this first shot and then see how many more I can pump outa the magazine of this repeater before they git me."

"Hold it, Red!" came Cort's sharp voice. "I'll do the shooting if they make the try." And to Hardy: "Just go ahead and give the order again, Bert. When you do, you're a dead man; they'll get me, but I'll get you first."

"You're resisting military arrest?"

"Go ahead and try it and see what happens," came the hard reply.

Neely Anderson stood beside her mother, a hand unconsciously holding to her arm. She saw Cort's right hand lying close to the heavy pistol at his right hip, the repeater across Red's lap up in the driver's seat, the hidden grins on the faces of the troopers. She saw indecision come into Major Hardy's face; he who had written her such passionate love letters, asking her to become Mrs. Hardy. Hard, atavistic men all, in a hard, wild desert country. Cort had just killed and now he was ready to kill again.

She looked at Hardy again.

He looked at Cort, and a certain kind of cold shrug came to his square shoulders. He had written to Neely, telling her of the killing of the Apaches and the capture of the smuggler pack train. He had even held out two bolts of the silk to give to her at the ranch. But Hardy saw the repeater in the hands of the grinning stage driver, the dead Indian on the ground; and he saw Jim Cort's right hand hanging close by the big pistol at his hip. He knew when the odds were against him. His own men were secretly satisfied; he could sense it.

"All right, Jim," he said casually. "It would have been a mere technicality anyhow. We'll call it off because that man on the stage is just damned fool enough to shoot. I'll see you later, mister," he added.

"Mister," Red grinned back, "don't try it while I'm drivin' this stage. The Wells-Fargo people have a powerful lot of influence, and the Post Office department of Uncle Sam is plumb sensitive about people who stop stages with mail sacks on 'em. You ever try stoppin' this stage, and they will bust you back to a mule-tendin' buck private, where you belong."

Hardy had to recover somehow. He turned to his men. "All right, boys, get a burying detail to work and dig some graves for these Indians. You, Sergeant Toland, take charge of those six horses."

Cort's voice said, coldly, "Four of them, Bert. All wearing Batton's brand. The other two are unbranded; they're mine."

"We'll take the six."

"Here we go again," Red grinned like a gargoyle. "You might be hell on military law, mister, but you ain't up to date on the rest of it. Them two unbranded hosses belong to Jim. Take it or the United States Cavalry and Wells-Fargo are goin' to go six hands 'round."

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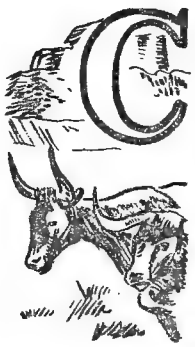


CORT TURNED his back and walked off, toward the horses. It was a gesture of contempt toward Major Hardy. He knew that the officer had kissed her for Cort's benefit; it wasn't in his nature to do otherwise, not in front of his men or her parents.

Cort picked up the lead ropes on his pack animal and the two unbranded horses. He rode off without a word or a backward glance, neither seeing

nor knowing of the disappointment in Neely Anderson's eyes.

Her father cleared his throat to cover general embarrassment. He took off the new western hat and mopped at his forehead. "Whew!" he said in relief. "What a day it has been. I'm becoming a bit dubious about buying this Batton ranch, Cap—er Major Hardy. At any rate, it doesn't appear as though things will prove dull."

"If you mean the Indians, we've got the fight pretty well whipped out of them except for sporadic raids such as this one. And we can take care of the ones from Sonora without too much trouble. Neely wrote me you would be on today's stage to Vail, and I was worried when we were hot on their trail in this direction. I think we'd better accompany you to the ranch. We'll probably catch up with you somewhere south of Vail."

The burying detail already were hard at work with shovels, scooping out shallow graves in the soft sand. Red loaded up his passengers and got ready to go on. Hardy came over and bent from the saddle to look in the coach; square-shouldered and every inch the leader. "We'll see you at the ranch tonight," he said. "Goodbye now."

Red yelled at his team and the coach sped off at a trotting pace. Neely looked back. Then she looked out the other side to where, in the distance the lone figure of a horseman moved southward through the greasewood, leading three other animals. He lipped a ridge, and then she saw him disappear from sight in an arroyo.

She settled back in the seat and remained silent, her thoughts turbulent and upsetting. Sight of Cort had struck fire in her, and she wondered if it was because he'd put in appearance at a time when help was needed. Or was it because she had seen in his grim, desert burned face the knowledge that as far as any past was concerned, there wasn't any. He had put it all behind him, buried it deep in six years as a rider of the desert wastes.

Her father glanced over at her. "Getting tired, Redhead?" he asked fondly, and smiling a little quizzically.

"A little," she said.

THEY ROLLED into Vail in another hour or so and Red hauled up before two buildings; a false-fronted general store and a false-fronted saloon. The girl saw a few riders lounging about; quiet-looking fellows who eyed her indifferently but with looks that told of hunger for the sight of a beautiful woman. Red jumped down and the passengers got out.

A man with an exceptionally dirty white apron around his waist came out of the saloon and looked at the driver. " 'Lo, Red," he greeted. "Yo're a little late. Gittin' old, or somethin'?"

"No," Red grunted. "Just dam' scared. 'Paches hit us a ways back; part of that bunch the soldiers got a little while back."

The lounge went out of the idling men's bodies. They came erect.

"Hell you say?" gasped out the barkeep.

"Ho, Red," boomed a big voice, and another man came through. This was Batton, the Santa Cruz rancher; big, bluff, hearty looking. "What's this about the redskins?"

Red told him. "They got Ace," he said. "He's up there in a tarp. But Jim Cort busted up the show. How about some of you fellers giving me a hand lifting him into the seat while I unload these folks' baggage?"

The Andersons were greeting Batton and the two men shook hands. Neely noticed for the first time, then, the big hack with four horses by the side of the building. It had a Circle B branded on one side, Batton's brand. A motherly-looking woman who could have been only the rancher's wife came from the store, her arms filled with packages. Neely and her mother walked over to the hack with her.

"Land sakes alive," she said, stowing them beneath the back seat, on

the floor. She turned, wiping sweat from her face. "I thought the cavalry had those pesky devils pretty well tamed, but just about everytime we think so they break out again, seems like. But it's sure a lot better than it was ten-fifteen years ago, before we didn't have any fort and few soldiers. They gave us a time of it, I can tell you. So Cort happened to come by? Maybe he's got a bad reputation among some folks for some things, but there never was more of a gentleman. And they killed Ace? What a terrible shame! His folks live not more'n thirty miles from us. He was only twenty-four and I've known him since he was a little tyke."

Red was handing down baggage to willing hands and Mrs. Batton went over as the last one came down. She looked up at the puffing, red faced driver. "What are you going to do with Ace's body, Red?" she asked.

"Take him on into Tombstone an' plant him, Miz Batton. He won't keep long in this hot weather. I got to get word to his folks. Seems like he said they're over here in this part of the country som'ers."

"You take him on in to the undertaking parlor and tell 'em to hold him as long as possible. I'll get word to them. Don't know how his mother is goin' to take it, poor soul." She turned to one of the riders. "LeRoy, you get on that horse of yourn and go tell Ace's folks. It's near fifty miles but you can get fresh horses at Haines' and the Double Arroyo ranches. You lay over there and help around the place while they're gone. Tell her I wish we could come but we got visitors and the ranch to look after."

A swivel-hipped young puncher said, "All right, Miz Batton. Soon's I git my canteen filled I'll git goin'."

Batton and another of his riders were helping each other lash the baggage into the hack, and still leave room for the five people. Neely saw the young puncher come out of the saloon with a dripping canteen in one hand. He went to a horse bearing the Circle B brand, tied on the one gallon metal canteen, and swung up.

"Be back in a few days," he said briefly to Batton, and jogged off around the corner, heading south and east into the desert wastes.

Neely stood there and watched him go, riding fifty miles across the desert in an effort to aid a "neighbor." And it came to her then, the full impact of it, just how big this country was; it and its people. A stage-coach guard had been killed by attacking Apaches, there had been a fight in which more men died, and seemingly within minutes life was flowing on again the same as usual.

She remembered something she had heard Batton say in Tucson: "This desert can be good to the strong an' dam' bad to the weak. You either whup it or it whups you. There ain't any middle course out here," and she knew that day in Vail that she was facing a new task of adjusting herself to this new way of life.

BATTON'S other cow-hand took the hack and drove over to water the horses and fill canteens. He came back and the five got in, the two men up front. The three women took the rear seat. They got under way, taking a "road" that was more of a trail, heading in a southerly direction. Mrs. Batton reached down from somewhere and pulled out a big basket covered with white cloths.

"I had an idea you folks would be hungry, so I brought along lunch. The chicken is probably pretty cold —I cooked it at three o'clock this morning before we left the ranch— but you can make out until we get home."

They drove all that afternoon and now men appeared out of the desert; men in blue. Hardy rode in close and exchanged greetings and the cavalry patrol accompanied them. Neely looked at the four led horses.

"Hell, them looks like some of my hosses, Anderson!" the rancher suddenly exclaimed. "Why, shore—I'd know thet long-legged claybank anywhere. The red devils stole him an' several more two-three nights ago, and left some played out hosses they had stole from Haines."

"Those are the four I was telling you about," Anderson said. "Cort took

the other two, the unbranded ones."

"Wal, if they belong to any of us ranchers along the Santa Cruz betwixt here and where Lon Pearson and his raiders hole up, they'll be turned back to their right owners."

"So you know Cort?" Neely heard her father ask in surprise.

"Know him? Shore, I know him, Anderson. He stops by our place every now and then. Strange man."

"I've heard something about him," Neely's father commented, cautiously.

"I expect you have. Any man who plays a lone hand like Jim does is bound to be talked about. Shore, I know—he's supposed to be a smuggler, a gun fighter, an maybe even a' outlaw. But out here we take a man fer what he's worth an' not what he does, *thet* part of it bein' his own business. You seen what happened today. If Jim hadn't come along yore wife would be dead by now an' yore daughter on the back of a' Apache hoss. You didn't see me in Wilcox with a tough bunch of cattle on my han's an' waitin' four days for cattle cars while my wife was took down sick....an' Jim Cort standin' by after he near killed a horse ridin' sixty miles for a doctor."

He let go a grunt, and that grunt said that they'd better not talk about it anymore.

THEY LEFT the desert late that afternoon, dropping down into flatter river bottom land that was green. In the distance the line of green cottonwood trees cut a verdant swath through the brownness, the desolation that surrounded them. The soldiers rode off to one side, dusty and tired. Neely herself had never realized that anybody could be as tired or as hungry as she was. The heavily-loaded hack reached the river, and Batton pulled the team up in four inches of water to let them suck away thirstily with heads lowered. Two miles away lay ranch buildings.

"There she is," Batton boomed out, pointing with his buggy whip.

The hack ground on across. The wheels sank deep into dry, powdery sand as they went on at a walk. They came out onto harder ground and drove in among cottonwood trees, and all of a sudden it was delightfully cool.

"Notice the difference?" Mrs. Batton asked. "That's the desert. Hot during the day, cool in the evenings. The cottonwoods draw moisture."

They drove on among the cottonwoods for another mile, pulled up to higher ground, and came into a lane between fences of barbed wire. It was hard-packed, and on either side lay green fields of alfalfa. Neely saw men in the fields, working with shovels. Water poured out of well constructed irrigation ditches.

"I irrigate," Batton explained. "I bought a steam engine an' a big pump from a mine outfit that went busted an' sunk a big well just above the ranch buildings over there. We only had to go thirty feet to git all the water we need, an' it'll handle a four-inch flow. I raise the alfalfa for my blooded hosses an' some milk cows an' work teams. The cattle forage for themselves. Only trouble we have is thet they keep breakin' down fences to git at the alfalfa. Then they eat, git bloated, an' lay down an' die—unless we can sometimes save 'em by stickin' a knife between their ribs an' lettin' the gas off their stomachs."

Neely said, her eyes glistening at sight of the sprawling adobe buildings, "It's beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

"You should have seen it when Pa and me first came out here," Mrs. Batton smiled. "I handled a scraper and team right alongside of him to level that land for irrigation. We built the first room of our house with four port-holes in it, so's we could see four different directions every morning before we opened the door. Them Apaches was mean in them days."

The hack rattled by a Mexican on a burro, herding a group of goats down the lane. Mrs. Batton explained.

"We have about a dozen Mexicans here with their families, who work the fields. They like goat milk. Our regular riders handle the cattle. Pa, how many riders have we got now?"

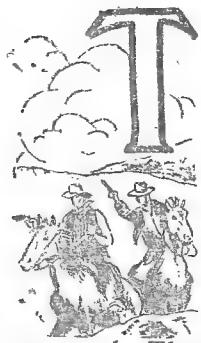
Batton's answer was a question. He turned in the seat as they neared the

buildings. "Who's thet man just rode up in front of the house. Looks like Lon Pearson."

Mrs. Batton peered out." It is, Pa. Now what do you suppose that outlaw wants with us?"

Nobody replied. Neely's eyes were on the man as they rolled up to a stop in front of the low, rambling adobe house with the big porch across the east side of them.

10



THEY rode up and pulled to a stop, Neely getting out tiredly. She paid no attention to the bold look of the handsome man on the horse. Her folks followed her down. Batton got to the ground, handing the lines to a Mexican youth. The soldiers were clattering up.

Batton looked up at Pearson, a little belligerently.

"What're you doin' here Lon?" he asked bluntly.

Pearson didn't answer for a moment.

* * *

After leaving the place where Sailor Morton had lost his gold he and his men had ridden on southward, out of the Oro Blancos and into the desert. The trail to Cort's camp was easy to follow now, the tracks deep in the soft surface that was mostly sand. They crossed the line and drove on, and it was about sundown when they reached Cort's camp. Sailor Morton swung down with a grunt of relief. He was stiff and sore, not being used to riding.

"Yep, this looks like it, all right," the raider said with satisfaction. "Now to keep a sharp lookout fer Apaches and find Cort's cache while we wait fer Smitty to bring them Chinese up the river."

They made camp, ate a big supper and slept with Pancho on guard. Nothing happened. Early the next morning they were up and, after breakfast, Pearson turned to the half Apache-half Mexican and grinned expectantly.

"All right, you danged breed—show some of that Apache blood. Find Cort's gold cache."

Pancho was short and squat from his mother's blood, but he was a tower of strength and endurance. He put on moccasins and began to circle the camp. Pearson and the others waited.

"Don't forget," Sailor Morton warned. "If that damned Indian of Cort's grabbed my gold and brought it back here, there ain't going to be any split on it. Matey, I'd have settled Cort's hash later anyhow."

They waited for half an hour. Then from somewhere over the ridge they heard a call. Lon Pearson rose and tossed away his cigarette. "Come on, boys. Pancho's found tracks."

They climbed up among the rocks and lipped the ridge. Down below the half breed stood gestulating. The party went down and came up beside the trailer.

"Here his tracks," he said in bad English. "you come."

He set off and they followed him. Cort always had stepped on rocks when possible, but a smudge of dirt here and an unusual color there were the same as a boardwalk to the trailer's black eyes. They dropped further down, worked along the floor of the gully, and the breed turned into the yawning jaws of a canyon. Here the trail ended abruptly.

Pancho went up among the rocks, jumping from one to the other like a small lizard, his black eyes darting. He circled, came down to the floor of the canyon, went up the other side. The men below waited and smoked.

Then a sharp cry from the breed and he pointed to a boulder. Pearson and his men began an eager scramble. They climbed up, and by the time they got to the place Pancho had the boulder rolled aside. There was a big hole hollowed out beneath it and the hole was empty—all except a scrap of white paper. The raider snatched it up and read the writing.

Pearson: When Sailor Morton set off with my pack train of silk, I merely picked up his gold to pay for the contraband and the mules. A fair swap. But I had a hunch that if he followed the river he'd run into your outfit. I figured you might come back to look for my cache. Well, you have found it. Red Calf, my Apache helper, hid the Sailor's gold in another place, then came back here after my cache. Sorry to disappoint you boys. A long hot ride for nothing.

Jim Cort.

Lon Pearson tore the paper into bits and flung it aside while Sailor Morton, still stiff from the long miles astride two different mounts, swore savage oaths and vowed revenge. Valesquez had said this man Cort was a sharp one.

"A long ride fer nothing, eh?" gritted the raider. "He'll think different when we wait here in his camp and pick up them Chinese. Damn his soul to hell!"

Smitty had finally showed up at the camp, riding his horse along the bank with his men on each side of the river as guards for the flatboats loaded with Chinese. Pearson had made the deal with Garcia, taking over the sixty Chinese—who were not coolies but merchants and other men of money. Three or four of them spoke English with varying degrees of fluency. They were the leaders. Garcia finished the deal and went back down the river in the flat boats with the man of the ship. It had been an uneasy voyage for him, but no Apaches had attacked.

The Mexican had brought along big leather waterskins and these were filled that afternoon, after the Chinese had rested. At sundown the pack horses were loaded with rice and dried fish, plus supplies for the riders, and in the moonlight a long line of plodding men began the trek northward toward the border. It was slow going because the aliens were not used to walking, and had been weeks aboard ship with little chance for exercise. Pearson studied them, set the pace of about two miles an hour, and then rested them for fifteen minutes.

AT TEN o' clock that night they camped in an arroyo in the desert, down below the lip of a bank. The moon was up bright, a white ball in the sky and you could see an amazingly long distance. Small fires were struck along the sandy floor and the tired Chinese began cooking rice, while the outlaws kept guard upon the rims, eyes searching the night for Apaches.

It was said that Apaches didn't attack at night because the ghosts of their dead were abroad, roaming the land, and mustn't be disturbed. But Pearson had been on the border too long to trust the red devils; he was taking no chances.

The chattering Chinese were eating hungrily when Pearson strolled up on the ridge to where the black bearded "Smitty" sat with his back to a rock, smoking a cigarette, his horse nearby.

"Nice night," the raider chief observed and sat down beside him.

"Yea," Smitty said. "But them dam' fires down there make me nervous. I'll bet Apache could see the glow for miles."

Pearson laughed, bringing out the smokings. He rolled and lit. "You're getting nervous, Smitty. You can't make a living for that Mexican woman getting skittish. Anyhow, it takes a lot of fire to cook rice for the sixty slant-eyed heathen."

The bearded outlaw grunted and dropped his cigarette butt into the sand covering it. "I know," he said. "But I'll shore feel a lot better when we git this bunch into Tucson an' turn 'em over to Bruckmann. Now thet's a sharp Dutchman. He lets us take all the risks an' he takes all the profits on anything thet's brought in. I shore don't know how he's goin' to handle as big a bunch as this in Tucson, but you can reckon thet thet Dutchman knows his business. Anyhow, I'll be plumb relieved when we git 'em in there."

"I was just thinking," the raider chief said casually, "that maybe we won't have to take 'em that far."

Smitty looked at him in surprise, his eyes narrowing in the moon lit night. "Yea?"

"Seems to me they oughta be packin' a lot of coin on 'em. I was just wonderin' if we stripped 'em down how much the haul would be."

"Thet thought has sorta been runnin' through my mind too."

Pearson rose. "We'll see," he said briefly, and left.

They let the Chinese finish eating and then sleep for two hours. The moon was far down toward the horizon when the outlaws woke up the tired aliens and got them under way once more. The long line of men in single file and in little groups plodded on, carrying their belongings, and the night grew colder. At daybreak the caravan finally came to a halt, making a dry camp. The outlaws cooked breakfast but most of the exhausted Chinese flopped down and promptly went to sleep. Pearson put his men on guard, two of them at two hours intervals, and rolled into his saddle blankets. The sun rose and grew hot. Men stirred, picked up their belongings, and sought what little shade the greasewoods had to offer. One of the Chinese, a big fat fellow who spoke broken English and could converse with Sailor Morton in a mixture of English and Chinese, appeared to be the leader. Pearson ordered him to make the others keep off the skyline, explaining about the Indian who might come any moment, and the others. Pearson went back to his saddle blanket beneath a huge yucca tree.

He woke up again in the afternoon and stretched lazily. The Chinese were cooking rice again and chattering among themselves. Smitty strolled over after a "breakfast" of bacon and flapjacks and coffee, picking his teeth.

"Them Chinese shore got after thet jerky we loaded up," he grinned. "Fust time they ever had anything like it. Thet big feller who savvys a little English says as how they eat fish fins where he come from. Now would be a good time," he added. "I seen one of them fellers goin' out in the brush a few minutes ago. He's got gold, all right. I seen thet heavy bag when he undid them funny clothes they're wearin'. We could jest line 'em up an' take it all, an' shoot any as tried to run."

"Not yet," Lon Pearson said. "There's Jim Cort."

SMITTY LOOKED surprised. "Cort? Where does he ring in on this deal?"

"You haven't forgot that crease across your thigh an' what happened to Peg Leg when we tried to ambush Cort last time, have you?"

"Hell, no!" grunted the black bearded man. "I ain't a man who forgits things like thet. But I also ain't dam' fool enough to try to throw a gun on Cort in a' even break."

"You won't have to," Pearson grinned. "Bruckmann likes me, an' he talked a little last time I seen him, when we opened a jug in his store. Cort figgers on buying the Batton place. Going to settle down as a cattle rancher. Batton and his wife want to go back to Missouri. I want that place too. Accordin' to the Dutchman, Cort figgers to hit up Batton on a deal next time he sees him. So this evenin' I'm goin' on ahead to try to buy that ranch. If Jim's beat me to it, then we will just take what gold these heathens have got an' run them in on Batton's ranch. I'm sendin' one of the boys for a U.S. Marshal. Hank ain't known to be connected with our outfit and he can go; he'll burn the breeze out right away. If Cort's bought that ranch, it'll be swarming with alien Chinese about the time the marshal gets there. With his reputation on the border, he won't have a chance."

Smitty took off his hat and scratched his shock of black hair. "Sounds good, I reckon," he admitted. "But you ain't took into consideration a lot of other things. Fust, four of them heathens speak English a little an' could tell the truth."

"You'll shoot those four," Pearson ordered bluntly.

"All right. Thet takes care of thet.

Second, suppose thet *you* git the ranch? Then what?"

"Easy. We already got their money for bringing them into the United States. We didn't *promise* to deliver them to Buckmann, where they'll pay more money to be shipped out to their friends. So we'll take 'em out in the desert, give 'em rice and water, point in the general direction of Tucson, and let 'em go. Then we'll get Cort in our own way. But I'd like to see him sent to prison; it'll hurt a whole lot more that way."

Blackie scratched his head again.

"All right," he finally said, a bit dubiously. "But there's somethin' about it makes me a little uneasy. Cort's sharp; they don't come any sharper. I'd druther jest take what these Chinese hev got, send 'em on to Tucson from here, an' let 'em git picked up an' sent back to where they cum from. I don't like this business of you buyin' thet Batton ranch. We're doin' all right, even if thet last holdup of the stage didn't pan out so well. But the hills are alive with silver in Tombstone since the strike last year. I like to take money at the point of a gun barrel."

Pearson grinned. "And end up with a hangman's rope around your neck. I'm playing it safe. I'll buy the ranch, turn 'respectable,' and we'll use it as a headquarters to raid cattle, steal horses, and hold up the stages to boot. I've got big plans, Smitty."

He outlined them, gave certain orders, and the plodding caravan got under way again at dusk. That was how it came about that Lon Pearson rode up to the Batton ranchhouse that afternoon just as he saw a hack coming down the lane, followed by about a dozen cavalrymen. Sight of the uniforms brought a touch of uneasiness in the mind of the raider. It was put aside at sight of a woman who got out of the coach—the loveliest creature he had ever set eyes upon. Fire went through him at sight of her. He saw the flaming red hair, the clear eyes, the lissome figure. He ignored the words of Batton. The rancher repeated them.

"What am I doing here?" Pearson smiled, swinging down. "Just want to talk a little business, Batton."

11

HE CAME over and shook hands, Batton a little reluctantly. His mein said that he wanted, and expected, an introduction to Neely. Batton did the honors. Pearson removed his hat, and Neely had to admit he was one of the handsomest men she had ever seen. He had manners and his hand-clasp was gentle.

"The desert, Miss Anderson," he said gallantly, "has bloomed up new since you got here. I hope you like our country."

"Thank you," she murmured.

Hardy and his men had clattered up. The Mayor swung down, and Batton turned to him.

"Of course you'll stay all night, Major," the rancher said.

"I believe we will, if it won't inconvenience you."

"Not at all, not at all. We'll get some extra help in the kitchen an' rig up an extra table."

"That won't be necessary, sir. My men have their own supplies. They can camp down among the cottonwoods."

"All right, let 'em rest up; they look ganted. But we've got an extra room in the house fer you."

"Thank you, sir," Major Hardy replied.

He gave his horse's rein's to a soldier and issued crisp orders. He took a pack from back of his saddle and carried it inside as the troopers clattered off. They all came into a big living room, cool and comfortable-looking. Calfskin rugs were on the floor and the furniture was mostly of willow, covered with rawhide, and filled with homemade cushions. Neely thought she had never seen such a comfortable looking place. She knew she was going to like this new home.

Batton had forgotten to introduce the officer and the outlaw. They shook hands a bit stiffly but correct

and polite. Batton let out a bellow at a Mexican girl, and began talking rapid fire Spanish. He turned to Hardy.

"She'll show you where the room is, Major," he said. "You can clean up a bit if you like. We'll have supper in about an hour."

Batton didn't know what kind of "business" the raider wanted to talk over with him—since he was certain that some of his stolen horses had been taken by the raider and his men—but cow-country courtesy demanded that he offer the hospitality of the ranch. Pearson was quick to accept; he put away his horse and prepared to stay overnight.

The ranch was a one-story affair with long wings running off east and west. A third wing comprised the kitchen and huge dining room. Neely Anderson found herself in a big room next to that of her parents. It was in the tip of the west wing. A flagstoned veranda ran by the open window and she leaned there, looking out at the green fields, the upward slope of the desert beyond, and heard the chugging of the steam engine's big pump. Batton had rigged up a big wooden water tower down by one of the corrals and piped water into all the rooms. He had invented a crude solar heating system of tin barrels on the roof, and Neely gave a cry of delight at sight of the long tin bath tub with its two spigots. Thumping sounds came from the hallway and a timid knock sounded on the door.

She opened it and saw two grinning Mexican youths with her trunks and suitcases. *"Por usted, senorita,"* (for you, Miss) one of them said, and they came in.

She used signs to show them where to put the baggage. "I'll have to learn Spanish, I'm afraid," she laughed.

They both grinned, and one said, "Is ver' izzy, senorita. W'en you wan' know somting in esspanish, you say, *'Como se llama este in Espanol?'* It mean, 'How is that name in esspanish?' Ver' izzy."

She laughed in sheer delight, the tiredness fleeing in an instant. She pointed to the bed. "Como se llama este in Espanol?" she asked.

"Cama," was the grinning reply. "You learn ver' fast, I theenk."

They went out laughing and she laughed too. She locked the door and laid out clothes on the *cama*, and then removed her own after pulling blinds over the window. She revelled in the sleekness of her young body as she went in and began filling the long, hand made tin tub with very hot water. Had she known the water was heated by the sun she would have been astonished; she thought it came from the steam engine chugging away over by the well.

She bathed and put on the clean dress, and worked at her hair. The tiredness of the long ride across the desert had been replaced by a tingling excitement. She was having dinner in her own new home tonight for the first time; Bert Hardy was in the house, and so was a bold-eyed man Mrs. Batton had said was an outlaw. They had been attacked by Apaches that very day—and out of a six years blank past had come Jim Van Cortland—out of the desert wastes on a running horse with a Winchester in his hands. He was somewhere out there this evening; alone, cold, implacable.

She had taken an hour to bathe, lying in the luxury of the big tub for long minutes before dressing, and now she heard the knock on the door. She opened it and saw Hardy. He held two big bundles in his arms.

EVERY SPOT of dust had been brushed from his blue uniform. His boots were newly shined and he was freshly shaven, his black mustache clipped carefully. She couldn't help comparing him with the bold, handsome, blond Lon Pearson—and with the lean, stony-faced 'Jim Cort.'

"Hello, darling," he greeted.

"Come in, Bert. What in the world do you have there?"

He placed the two bundles on the bed. "A little present for you, Neely. You wrote that you'd be on the stage today, coming to the ranch. So I brought these along, a rather scarce commodity in this country."

She opened the bundles, and a small cry of delight broke from her at

sight of the two bolts of Chinese silk. One was snow white, the other a flaming red.

"Why, Bert!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Bert—how in the world—where did you get them. They're lovely!"

"I captured one of Jim Cort's smuggler pack trains recently," he said casually. "Five pack mules loaded with these. Of course I had to turn the goods over to the fort commander, but the regulations do not say that I can't hold out two of them for the prettiest girl in the world, the future Mrs. Hardy."

"Why, Bert, how thoughtful of you. I—I don't know what to say."

"Say it like this, Neely," he replied, and again she felt herself swept into his strong arms.

"Bert, you....mustn't," she gasped out, freeing herself. "I—I"

Then came the sound of a supper gong, ringing throughout the house.

They went out into the hallway and down it, and came into a huge dining room. There was a long table covered with a white table cloth with plates and silver set out; enough to seat a dozen people. Mexican women were hurrying here and there with bowls filled with steaming dishes; roast beef, creamed potatoes, black-eyed peas, big pies and a peach cobbler. There were bowls of homemade "chow-chow," a green, spicy condiment. Pickled chilis in jars, dried red peppers of the kind she had seen hanging in strings from a corner of the veranda, and two small bowls filled with what looked like green buckshot. She saw a huge jar of cool sweet milk and a steaming coffee pot set on a flat rock in the middle of the table.

The windows were open. It was now dusk. From the Alamo trees came the twitter of birds, and from somewhere in the distance came the bawl of a milk pen calf. The big steam engine had ceased its chugging. Off in the distance among the cabins inhabited by the Mexicans came the sounds of a woman's voice, singing, accompanied by a guitar. Her husband, playing for her as he waited for his supper, Neely Anderson thought.

People were filing into the room. Neely saw Lon Pearson, clean shaven and with blond locks shining in the light of the lamps, enter. Batton was heading for the table.

"Well, folks," boomed the rancher. "Just grab a chair an' set down. Fust who gits to the table here in this house gits the most to eat."

They seated themselves. Batton sat at the head of the table. Neely's parents sat at his left, Major Hardy and Neely at his right. Neely sat between Hardy and Lon Pearson. Mrs. Batton seated herself by Mrs. Anderson.

"Now folks," the rancher said. "If you'll bow your heads, I'll say the blessing."

They bowed their heads.

"Oh Lord," Batton said over his plate, "we thank Thee for this food that has been placed before us. We ask You to forgive us any sins we might have committed this day, and look after us until the coming of a new dawn. Amen."

He raised his head. "Dive in, folks,"

It was then that Neely Anderson, raising her head from her plate, saw movement through the open door of the big living room beyond. A rider had come into view, leading a pack mule. He swung down and something old clutched at her heart.

Batton had seen too. He rose from the head of the table.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "It's Jim Cort!"

12

CORT PULLED up, leading his pack animal. He saw the lights in the house but not those present, in the dining room. The rancher shook hands eagerly.

"Howdy, Jim. Git down, man, git down. You're just in time for supper. I'll have one of the Mexicans take care

of your horses. Say—I was up to Vail today an' I heard plenty. Thanks for turnin' them hosses of mine over to Hardy."

"I noticed his men camped down among the cottonwoods. Maybe I'd better not stay over night, Bat. I did want to talk business with you, but Hardy and I are not exactly friendly."

"You mean about thet pack train business he claims was yourn?"

"No," Cort said. "It was my train, all right, Bat, though it had been stolen by a man named Sailor Morton. I might as well tell you that I've known Hardy before now."

"I see," the rancher said thoughtfully. "I sorta got that impression from stories I heard about what happened between you and him at the stage this mornin'. Wal, you two can put it aside while you're here."

"I'd better go on and camp out. I can state my business right now. Bat, I'm through as a smuggler; made my final deal with Bruckmann in Tuscon this trip."

"Good, Jim. Want to go to work on this ranch? They'll need a good man around here."

"I want to buy this ranch from you, Bat. For cash," Jim Cort replied.

Batton whistled under his breath. "It's pourin' rain," he commented. "Because it just happens there happen to be some more people in the house with the same idee."

"Who?" Cort asked. "I'll outbid them, Bat."

"The Anderson family who was on thet stage today when the 'Paches hit it git first crack at it, Jim. We worked out most of the details in Tucson some time back. But just before sundown Lon Pearson showed up."

"Pearson?"

Batton grinned at the look of surprise on Cort's face. "Yep, rode up an says as how he wants to buy this ranch. Nobody but Lon would do it, either— after stealin' my hosses the way he has."

"Why didn't you boot him off the ranch?" Cort demanded harshly.

That grin from the rancher again. "Because Anderson wants to cut corners wth me on the price for the ranch. I expect I'll be sellin' to him, the deal bein' purty near as good as closed. But with Pearson waitin' to buy I can get more money out of the easterner. Thet's the main reason I let him stay instead of kicking him off. Well, here comes a Mexican hand. He'll take care of your horses; come on in."

But Cort shook his head. "I would not risk it, Bat. A few weeks ago Pearson and some of his hooligans threw an ambush at me on the way back from Tucson, thinking I was loaded down with gold from Bruckmann's big safe. I just keep enough down south to pay for goods, the rest in Tucson. So they threw an ambush at me and we had quite a lttle scrap of it. I got one of his men and creased another before I drove them off and then made a run for it with one fast pack mule."

"He won't make any trouble in my house," was the grim reply. "And, anyhow, now that your're here to buy the ranch I could go in and order thet damned outlaw to drift."

Cort finally acceded. He took a slicker roll from back of the pack animal's saddle. "What happened to them two unbranded hosses you took from the 'Paches after thet fight this mornin'?" Batton inquired.

"I stopped by Mrs. Larrabee's house and gave them to her," Cort said. "She is having a tough time since the Apaches got her husband two years ago. I urged her to give up that little place and get out of there to town. I told her there was no telling what would happen to a pretty woman like her, living there all alone, if some of these road agents or desperadoes happen to drift by some night. I feel sorry for her."

Batton eyed him in the dusk and grinned loftily. "I felt the same sorry fer my wife, who was a widow, too. Three weeks later she wasn't a widow anymore. She was Mrs. Batton. Ain't no woman in the world can attract a man like a purty young widow. Men

just can't resist 'em, so I reckon I'd better go over in the mornin' an' make her move over here, what with this raid on the stage coach today. You shore came along at the right time, Jim, and only by the grace of God. If you hadn't, thet Anderson gal would start in bein' a 'Pache squaw tonight, or she'd have hed her throat cut in case Hardy and his men closed in. Comin' out from town Anderson told me all about thet runnin' fight an' about how he knowed you back east. Thet girl was all ears. Then Anderson sorta opened up to ast me a few things about you, but he didn't get far. Well, let's go inside to supper. I'll go over in the mornin' an' git Kitty Larrabee an' bring her over here. She can go to work till I find a buyer fer her little place and the few head of stock. Anderson might want to add it to his holdings, if he buys. If he doesn't, I'll sell to you, Jim; but only on condition you stick around here fer a day or two until we git the deal closed.

"All right," Cort agreed.

FORCE OF habit made him slip the repeating rifle from its scabbard. He went with the rancher up across the flat, flag-stoned veranda and into the big living room with the arch of the dining room just beyond. He felt ill at ease and uncomfortable at sight of Neely and her family, Hardy in immaculate blue, and Pearson. Six years in the desert alone had taught him to prefer solitude instead of the crowd. He stayed in Tucson only long enough to take care of business, because the call of the wastelands was always upon hm. He ate in small, out-of-the-way restaurants, avoided the bars, and then headed back southward again to make lonely camp, cook his meals, and then lay there with head propped up on the saddle, smoking and thinking.

Now his chaps made swishing sounds and his spur rowels clinked on the floor as, Winchester and slicker roll in hand, he followed Batton into the house.

"Ho, Ma, look who's here!" he boomed at his wife. "Come fix him up with a room an' let him wash up a bit. Hurry it up, Jim, or you'll hev to eat supper all by yoreself."

Mrs. Batton had excused herself from the table. She came over and shook hands with Cort. Neely and the others sat staring. He had not, she noticed, even looked in her direction, and yet he knew she was there. He couldn't have helped knowing. And he was ignoring her.

"Hello, Jim, you Apache shooting rider," Mrs. Batton greeted. "You come along with me and I'll fix you up with a room. Pa, you go back an' eat with the folks. Go ahead and begin supper, folks. I'll eat with Jim."

Cort followed her down the hallway of the south wing and Batton went back to take his place at the table. If he noticed the strained look on Lon Pearson's face or the poker expression on Major Hardy's, the shrewd rancher said nothing. Many strange things had happened along the Santa Cruz. He only knew that Hardy had been a smiling, genial officer when he came in with Neely after presenting her with the two bolts of contraband silk taken from Cort's five-mule pack train. He wasn't now; he was all military officer.

Neely broke the awkward silence. "I saw through the doorway that Jim had only one pack animal. He must have sold those other two horses he captured from the Apaches this morning."

It might not have been the right thing to say, in view of Hardy's presence and what had transpired there, but the days events had filled her mind with one man and one man only; and by some strange combination of circumstances he was now on the ranch. She suddenly felt her appetite gone.

They were helping themselves to the steaming food now. Neely saw Batton fill his place and then reach over and pick up one of the little green pellets from the bowl and chew on it before taking the first bite of meat.

"No," the rancher said, chewing lustily. "He didn't sell 'em, Miss Anderson. He gave 'em away."

"But I thought he wanted them for himself," she exclaimed.

"Maybe he did. But it just happens thet over west of here on my boundary there's a woman named Kitty Larrabee. She's one of the purtiest little tykes you ever saw—not a day more'n twenty-three. Her an' her husband took up some land over by Greasewood Springs to git a start farmin' an' raisin' a little stock. They wuz married when they was kids. They wuz doin' all right too till he went out after the stock one evenin' an' she heard a rifle shot. A couple of renegade Apaches had slipped up an' shot him off his hoss. But she's a dead game little woman if there ever was one an' she stuck it right out by herself, tryin' to make a go of it alone. I tried to git her to come over here an' live with us, but she's got as much pride as good looks. Howsomeever, she's havin' a hard time of it. So Cort took them two hosses of hisn he got from the raiders an' led 'em by to give to her. He's allus helpin' out folks like thet, an' there's many a family twixt Tucson an' the Blanco Oros who'd a gone hungry except for Cort."

He spooned more potatoes and reached for another of the green pellets, chewing it.

NEELY SAT there, and some kind of fires of jealousy shot through her. She didn't know why. But she told herself that when a man would go out of his way to help a pretty young widow of twenty-three, then there must be something more to it than charity.

"Anyhow," the rancher went on, "he's plumb worried about her since that raid this mornin', what with renegades an' outlaws"—this for Pearson's benefit—"roamin' around the country. So tomorrer we're just goin' over there an' make Kitty come here to live. She's got no business bein' over ther alone."

"Of course not," Neely murmured.

"Jim put a purty good scare in her today." Batton went on, quite unaware that every word about the girl was a stinging barb in Neely's breast. "If you buy this layout of mine, Anderson, you oughta take over them springs from her. They're worth their weight in gold. It'll add one more big green bit of pasturage fer yore cattle. Then, too, Miss Anderson here might find it a bit lonesome all alone on a ranch after livin' in the big cities. Kitty would be good companionship. She can ride like a man, shoot a rifle if she has to, milk a cow, or do just about anything else. You oughta find something for her to do."

"I'm sure we can," Mrs. Anderson put in. "That's a splendid idea, Mr. Batton. By all means, bring her over here at once."

Pearson spoke up. "Sounds like a good idea all right," he said. "But just suppose that Mr. Anderson did not buy the ranch?"

"Why not?" asked the easterner.

"Because," the raider said, "that's why I'm here. I've had my eye on this place for quite some time. I'm prepared to bid against Mr. Anderson for the purchase of it."

In the silence that followed Batton's chuckle came softly. "Now thet's what I'd call one of them co-incidences. You see, it jest happens that the reason Jim dropped by tonight on his way south from Tucson was for the same reason. *He* wants to buy it too."

Neely unconsciously thought of the woman Kitty. Was that why Cort wanted to buy the ranch? Was that why he was responsible for the woman being brought here tomorrow?

Hardy had taken little or no part in the conversation. But he seemed to read Neely's thoughts, and he was still remembering his humiliation that morning when he found himself facing a showdown with Cort and the red-headed stage driver over the events that had taken place following the killing of the Apache raiders.

"I expect," he said, "that Jim is doing the same sensible thing so many more of these smugglers are doing: finding it the wise course to quit while their skins are whole. That

last pack train the Army took from him probably convinced him—"

He didn't finish the rest of it, for Mrs. Batton and Cort came in beneath the arch leading to the big front room. Cort was washed and his blonde hair slicked down. He had removed his gunbelt.

He nodded a curt greeting to Pearson, said, "Hello. Bert," to Major Hardy, nodded to the others, and sat down beside Mrs. Batton.

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MRS. BATTON said, "All right, Jim. You've had a long, hard ride across the desert from Tucson with only camp cooking. I want you to fill up that plate and eat like a horse. You're too lanky; you need more home cooking."

"I hear," Lon Pearson said to Cort, "that you sent a bunch of Apaches to the Happy Hunting Ground today. You're a good man with a Winchester, no doubt about that."

"You ought to know," Cort said coldly over his plate. "The last time you and that outfit of yourn tried to bushwhack me I got Peg Leg with a lucky shot from a running horse and creased one of the others. That fellow Smith, I think. How bad was he hit?"

Batton half rose from the table. "Hold it, boys," he said. "This is my home until it's sold. All men who meet here will forget any quarrels."

"Fair enough, Batton," Pearson smiled. "No doubt about it—Cort and me's got a few things to settle, but we won't do it here. Right now I'm interested in two things: this wonderful food and buying this ranch from you."

"We'll talk about it in the morning," the rancher said, and his half hidden glance at Anderson was filled with satisfaction. "Cort wants to buy the place too."

Cort had reached for one of the little buckshot sized objects. He chewed on it and began eating.

"I'm going to try one of those," Neely exclaimed. "I've been sitting here filled with curiosity, watching you eat those, Mr. Batton, and now Jim is doing it. Pass me one, please."

Cort ate with his head down over his plate He was uncomfortable and regretted he had come. He realized now that it wasn't co-incidence Neely and her folks had been on the stage. Batton had met them at Vail and brought them to the ranch. The rancher was looking at the girl, and grinning with open amusement.

"I wouldn't do it, Miss Anderson," he advised. "I just wouldn't try it at all."

"But why not?"

"Well, it's like this," he explained. his eyes twinkling. "The human body can build up resistance against almost anything: strong seegars, chawin' tobacco, whiskey, and so on. Now you don't look like a young woman who'd smoke segars. If you tried it, you'd git sick as a dog the first time. But if you kept at it—an' a lot of women in America smoke *'em*—you'd soon git to like 'em. Same way with chawin' tobacco or whiskey. The first chaw would make you sick, the first drink would make you pie-eyed. But if you kept on at it, you'd soon git to like 'em both."

She was holding up one of the pellets in her hand, looking at him. "But what has that to do with these?" she half protested.

Batton chuckled. "Them's the hottest peppers ever growed in the earth. They're hotter then them dried red ones there, an' them *chilis encurtidos* —thet means pickled Chilis—are plumb sweet beside what you got in your hand. Now down here in this country we eat a lot of Mexican food. The hotter it is, the better we like it. But you got to develope a taste fer it. You bite into thet, Miss, an' you'll think you've just clamped down on the red hot end of a branding iron."

She placed the pellet back into the bowl. Her father was obviously interested. He reached for one, holding it between his fingers and looking at it speculatively.

"Why, Mr. Batton, we have highly

spiced foods in the east, too. This doesn't look that bad. I believe I'll try one."

"Ma," the rancher said to his wife, "git the pitcher of water handy."

Anderson bit down on the pellet and began to chew. His face changed, he opened his mouth, and then he was coughing violently, handkerchief out, gasping and reaching for his water glass. He drank in gulps, unmindful of the laughter. He got up and went to the window, making *whooshing* sounds in an effort to blow the heat from his burning mouth. It was on fire. He came back and got more water, tears in his eyes now. Batton was grinning delightedly and reaching for another one to go with his meat. He turned to Neely.

"All right," she laughed. "I believe you. Father has always boasted about how he liked hot foods; I'll bet he won't again."

CORT SAT there eating, taking no part in the loud laughter, hoping only to get finished as soon as possible. By the time he came to his dessert Anderson was coherent again, though his mouth was still burning. He looked at the rancher. Then he began to laugh too.

"Batton, I'll buy this ranch without further inspection. I like it here. I've never eaten food like this, never seen such a wonderful country or so delightful a home. I've worked hard to make a fortune. I almost broke my health in a drive for money and more money. Now I see what I've missed. I'm going to relax and take life easy. I'm going to learn how to ride a cow horse and shoot a gun. But I know nothing about running a ranch. I'm as ignorant about the cattle business as a child. So I'm going to buy the ranch, and I want you to recommend a good man to run it for me."

"I'm open for the job," Pearson said, though his bold eyes were upon Neely.

That one brought silence. Major Hardy stirred his coffee and looked at Batton. The rancher's eyes were upon Cort.

He said, with studied casualness, "That's plumb generous of you, Pearson, but Cort has knowed this family a long time. Jim, why don't you dig in here an' run the outfit for a while till Anderson learns the ropes?"

Cort looked at Batton. He saw Hardy's eyes upon him, and he saw the anger, the fear, the uneasiness in them. Cort didn't give a damn about Neely anymore—that was all over—, but this man hated him; he had kissed Neely there at the stage solely to let Cort know that she was now his girl.

"All right," Jim Cort said. "If it's agreeable with the new owner, I'll take over until he can find another man."

That was all. He finished, rose, and the others rose. They went through the big living room and out to the chairs on the long, flat-stoned veranda. The moon was up, bright and clear, the night warm. From down among the cottonwoods two hundred yards away glowed the fires of the troopers. Their laughter came plainly. From the Mexicans' quarters over to the east guitar music floated from the open doorway of one of the adobe cabins.

Cort leaned against the wall, rolled a cigarette, lit it, and then strolled down the west wing's porch. A huge cottonwood grew just beyond the end, throwing out shadows in the night. Cort moved on past it, walked a hundred yards to where a wagon freight showed in the moonlight. He went over and sat down on the tongue, smoking and innerly cursing himself for taking the job. It had been resentment toward Hardy, a blow back at the officer for taking his pack train, gloating over him about Neely, telling her who and what he was. Jim. . . . desperado, smuggler, gun fighter.

He knew Hardy and the man's driving ambitions. He could still remember those years ago at the Point when he had had to ask permission to speak to the man who now sat on the front porch, wearing the insignia of a Major in the cavalry. Hardy had displayed his qualities for leadership, and discipline, even then. He had proven them in a dozen forts, until he finally was assigned to Fort Huachuca; and here he had proven them again.

He'd got several Apache raiders, and at the same time he'd got Jim Cort's pack train. Cort was glad now

that Sailor Morton had stolen it. Had Bert Hardy caught him with it and tried to take it, there would have been a shoot-out with Cort the victor, and a fugitive from the U.S. Military authorities.

He sat there on the wagon tongue in the moonlight, smoking one cigarette after the other, his taciturn face showing nothing of his thoughts. He heard the voices from the front porch, laughter, and then he saw her coming toward him in the moonlight, her white dress gossamer.

She had seen the glow of his cigarette.

"Jim?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Yes," he said.

She came up to him, to where he sat with his back against the wagon box, resting on the double trees.

"I—I wondered where you had gone. May I sit down?"

"It's your wagon now, Neely," Jim Cort said. "I only work here."

"I can sense the bitterness in your words. Jim, there is so much I want to say—all those years when we were so much younger. And now, out of a clear sky, you here; you and Bert and my family. I'm all confused."

"You'll get over it. It just takes time for adjustment. I had to get adjusted to the desert too."

"You have. I recognized you the moment I saw you from the stage," she said faintly. "I suppose shallow thanks are not in order after the service you rendered us today, saving our lives, but I wish to extend them to you....Jim."

"I didn't know you were on the stage," he said almost harshly. She saw his hard face in the glow of the cigarette butt as he pulled furiously on it; a brief outline in red that faded again. "I left Tucson yesterday afternoon and rode until dark, got away again at daybreak. I knew Red was coming out this morning, and I paralelled the road, keeping to the gullies and off the skyline. You learn that in the smuggling business. I just happened to be in the right place when the Apaches hit, that's all. I was thinking of Red and Ace, not the passengers."

"I'm glad you're here. I'll feel much safer now."

"I'll be here until I can get another man. Red. I'm sending word to him tomorrow. He's an ex-cow puncher who knows this country, and that job of driving the stage is beginning to get on his nerves, what with hold ups by Lon Pearson and his gang and raids like that one today. He wants to quit and go back to ranch work."

"Pearson?" she gasped out. "He held up the stage?"

"He was masked, but Red knew him. He—"

HE DIDN'T finish it. Another figure was coming toward them in the moonlight. Major Hardy.

He loomed up. "Oh, there you are, Neely. I have some news for you. The deal for the ranch is completed, and your parents are giving both a housewarming and a farewell party for Mr. and Mrs. Batton. It will give you an opportunity to get acquainted with all the neighbors—and I assure you the fort will be fully represented."

"Why, that's grand, Bert. I think it's a wonderful idea What do you think, Jim?"

He got up, tossing away his final cigarette. From over by the Mexicans' cabins came the twang of guitars and more singing.

"Noches de Mexico,
Quando los nubes son en el mundo,
Yo voy conme triste...."

"What are they singing, Jim?" Neely asked. "It's a beautiful song."

"Nights of Mexico," he said a little gruffily.

"Translate it,' she ordered.

"Nights of Mexico. When the clouds are in the world—or, literally, the sky I go with my sadness, or sorrow....I'd better go down and see about my horses. Good night."

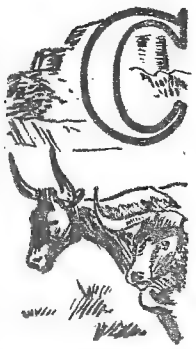
He was gone toward the distant corrals, and the two looked after him. Hardy sat down beside her.

"Bert," she whispered. "He hates me. He treats me like I'm mud beneath his feet. He resents my presence."

He sat down beside her. "Does he?" he asked, and she caught the slight edge in his voice. "He hates you, and yet he took the job here. I envy him,

being so close to you. Neely, I have two weeks leave coming, a reward for capturing his pack train of silk and killing those Apache raiders. I want to spend it here on the ranch with you; and when it's over I want to go back to the fort with you with me—as Mrs.Hardy."

14



CORT went down toward the corrals. They lay circular in the moonlight, with the various sheds and one big feed barn beyond. This was where Batton stored his alfalfa for the blooded horses. Nearly a dozen cows lay in the milk pen, chewing contentedly while their calves wandered around outside. It was quiet, and peaceful, and Cort saw the end of a dream. For months he had been planning to broach Batton on the subject of buying the ranch. Now it was too late, and some kind of a fate had brought the new owners out of the past, one of whose face haunted him.

He was fighting against it, and there was little emotion on the surface. But everything of six years ago had come back with a rush; and again Jim Cort cursed himself for taking the job.

Sound came from behind. He turned from the corral fence. It was Lon Pearson. "Nice night," Pearson said.

Cort said, "Yea," and let it go at that.

The raider leaned against the fence, a square shoulder against a cottonwood post. He was rolling a cigarette, his features now sardonic in the darkness. "So you're taking over as major domo?" he asked.

"Looks that way."

Neither of them were packing guns. This Cort regretted. He hadn't forgotten that attempted ambush.

"Sailor Morton was plumb upset about you takin' his gold," Pearson said over the lighted match cupped to his lips.

"I was plumb upset over him taking my packtrain," Cort answered. "So I 'sold' it to him for forty-five thousand dollars. My Indian helper picked it up and hid it again. A fair swap."

"How'd you know he'd end up with me?" demanded the raider.

Cort sneered. "He's a man of the sea. When he ducked out with that pack train loaded with silk he wouldn't hit across the desert. He didn't know his 'navigation,' as he called it. I knew he'd stick to the river and follow it. And knew that he was bound to run into your camp in time. He'd blow in there, stiff from the long ride. tell you his story—at least the part about meeting me and knowing where my camp was located. He'd mention the gold he saw me with. You knew I was on my way to Tucson—he might have mentioned the emeralds I bought from him. And I knew you too well. With me in Tucson you could risk back trailing to my camp to try finding my cache. So I simply wrote a note on the spot, when the fight broke out, gave it to Red Calf, my Indian helper, and had him first pick up the Sailor's gold and then go on burning the breeze back to camp to my cache. So the Sailor is riding with your raiders now, eh?"

"He's one of my men," grunted the raider. "And he's aimin' to get that money back that you stole from him."

Cort looked at him in the moonlight, and again the sneer crossed his hard face. "And you're aiming to help him?"

"I've got a score to settle with you. But I'll do it in my own time and in my own way. They made a mistake in hiring you to ramrod this outfit, Cort."

"I'm going to send word to Red, the stage driver, to come out right away and take over. I have no intention of staying. By the way, he recognized you when you held him up west and north of Benson the last time. I'm just warning you, in case you get some ideas. Red's an ex-cow puncher, and he's not afraid of the devil itself. You get too *many* ideas about this ranch —or Neely Anderson—and you might

get them backfired into your face. Just a warning."

"I'll take care of that," growled the raider. "I got a few irons in the fire I ain't talkin' about."

"Leave them lay while you're a guest of this ranch. That means a truce between us while you're here. I'm still willing to call it quits, Pearson. You tried to take my pack outfit, thinking I had a load of Bruckmann's gold in it, and I protected it. If you came off second best, losing one man and another wounded, that's their hard luck. I'd call it even."

"I'm not callin' it even," Lon Pearson said, and dropped his cigarette butt. He ground it into the powdered dung by the corral with a boot heel. "So now that the ranch is sold, I reckon I'll pull out tonight."

"Good idea," Cort said. "And as of now I reckon your presence is no longer welcome on this ranch at any time of the future."

"The girl, huh?" jeered Pearson, "Afraid me an' the Major will be too much competition, eh?"

HE LAUGHED and went on toward the house. Cort strolled over to a small adobe bunkhouse not far away and close by the Mexican's cabins. There were three men in it. One of the others, LeRoy, was probably still riding hard tonight. The other hadn't returned with them from Vail. Five men.

Cort introduced himself to the three as the new foreman and told of the sale of the ranch.

"So they swung the deal, eh?" one of them, a tall, bemustached man of thirty or so asked. "I been hearin' the boss an' Missus do a lot of talkin' about it after they got back from the trip to Tucson. And you're the new foreman, Cort?"

They knew him only by sight and casual meetings at the corrals when he came to and from on his trips. He had always stayed in the ranch house.

"Just temporarily, Hank. I want you to saddle up a good horse in the morning and go to Tucson with a message for Red, the stage driver. He made the run down to Tombstone today and will be back on the return trip tomorrow. He'll blow in about dark after a twelve or thirteen hour run. Tell him that ideal ranch job he's been complaining about not finding is here at Batton's, working for the Andersons. Tell him I said pack up his wife and kids and what furniture he wants to bring and come on down here right away."

"All right," Hank replied. "You said just temporary. Red taking over?"

"Yes, and he'll be a good man. They don't come any better. But maybe you had better stroll over to the house and talk over the trip with Anderson, just to make sure. Got an extra bunk here? I'll be moving in with you boys."

"Shore. That one in the corner is empty. And yo're lucky. That Mexican woman who cooks for us is the best ever. Lordy, the grub she don't shovel out for us."

Cort didn't say anything about the fight at the stage. They would find out in time. He and Hank went toward the house and Cort entered his room from the wing door. He was gathering up the belongings—his shaving outfit and spare clothes—and packing them back into the slicker roll when somebody knocked on the door. It was Major Hardy.

He stood there in the doorway, and there was something almost friendly on his face. "May I come in, Jim?" he asked politely. "I'd like to talk with you."

"Come on in," Cort said, and went back to his packing. "You can talk while I'm wrapping this slicker roll."

Hardy came in. "You're leaving?" he asked in obvious surprise.

"Just moving down to the bunkhouse with the boys—where I belong." Jim Cort grunted sourly. "Sit down, if you like. What's on your mind, Bert?"

"A truce, Jim. You put me in a bad spot today, in front of my men and also in front of the Andersons." He sat down on the bed and removed a cigar from his blouse.

"You put yourself in it," Cort said. "If you kissed Neely for my benefit, it was wasted. The past is dead, finished. You got the kiss, but you wast-

ed the effect on me; it wasn't necessary."

"Hmm. I see. But you took the job just the same, and I think it was to spite me. Wasn't it?"

"Yes," Cort said. "You kind of made things bad for me, too. That pack train the big Sailor had run off with was mine, all right, like you guessed," and he told of the man's entrance into his camp and the subsequent events leading up to its capture by Hardy. "But I'm glad he stole it. If you tried to run *me* down and *take* it, I'd have shot you out of the saddle, let you lay, and gone on. I mean it, Bert. Now I'm going down and stay with the boys until your friend the stage driver can get out here to take over and ramrod this outfit."

"And then?" softly puffing on the cigar.

"I'm drifting. New range. Buy a good ranch somewhere."

"What about this woman Kitty? She playing any part in it?"

"That's my own damned business, Bert," Cort shot back at him.

"I like it. From what I hear of her, she'd make you an ideal wife. You're a frank man, Jim, so I'm going to be frank. I was a bit afraid that Neely would let that stage coach business today, and the part you played in it turn her head and make her forget her position and family name and what—ah—"

"And what I am," sneered Cort, lashing savagely at the buckles. "If that's what you're worrying about, Bert forget it. I'm not in love with her. Maybe she does disturb me when I look at her, but it's the same thing that disturbs any man who's been months away from a town, when he sees a beautiful woman. I don't have to tell you—you're a desert man too."

"I know exactly what you mean, and I understand. That makes my purpose here much easier to explain. I want to call a truce with you. Forget what's happened between us in the past and be friends during the remainder of the time you will be here....that is, while we're both here. I have two weeks leave due any time I wish it, my men are tired, and now that the redskins' last raiding party has been cleaned out of this part of the territory I'm going to stay here for a while and take in the housewarming for the Andersons and going away party for the Battons. Shall we shake on it?"

He got up and extended his hand. Cort shook.

He said, "All right, Bert."

HE GOT ready to go, picking up his rifle and slicker roll. Hardy sat on the bed again, smoking thoughtfully. Something in his mein said there was something else on his mind. Finally he spoke.

"Jim, now that you'll be leaving soon, and now that we're friends again, I've something e l s e to say. Again I'm going to be f r a n k. Jim, the Army is my career. It's a passion with me."

"Hell, you don't have to tell me. I haven't forgotten my first year at the Point, when you were finishing up. You made it tough on us every opportunity you got...and I'll bet a hundred dollars that if I went down and talked to your men they'd say you still do."

"They would be correct. I believe in human discipline in all walks of life. The masses haven't either the intelligence or the initiative to rule themselves, so there must be leaders. That is particularly true in the Army. We must have discipline. But while we're being so frank, I'll continue. I want promotion more than anything else in the world—promotion and Neely as my wife. I'm working hard to get both. I suppose you already know—or have guessed—that you have been partly responsible for my recent promotion to the permanent rank of Major. The Old Man at the fort asked me to get results—just one smuggler pack train, if nothing else. I went out to waylay you and wait until you came along. The Indians were just a lucky break that comes to a man once in a lifetime. I brought in your pack train and a report of a successful engagement with a band of renegade Apaches. The Old Man kept his promise. He went to the General and got me these oak leaves I'm wearing."

"All right, I'm not complaining,"

Cort grunted. "I got forty-five thousand dollars in gold for them, plus nearly thirty thousand profit from a certain man who bought the emeralds paid for with the gold. I bought them from the man you pursued with the pack train. He had stolen the train from me during the fight. I got back the gold; I'm satisfied."

Hardy's cigar had gone out. He lit it again, smoking thoughtfully.

"That makes me feel better, now that we're friends once more as we were in the old days," he said. "But, Jim, it isn't enough for me. The Old Man at the fort is retiring next year. He's a full colonel. They might send out a man to replace him and they might pick his successor from one of the officers."

"You, for instance?" Cort grinned thinly.

"If things break j u s t right. We're after Geronimo, but we can't find him. If I could bring him in, when the General and the whole cavalry have failed, I'll have a pair of eagles on my shoulders and command of Fort Hauchuca within one year. You know where he is."

"Yes, I know where he is," Cort admitted. "I talked for an hour with him not too long ago."

"I see," Hardy answered thoughtfully and pulled harder on the cigar stub. "And you could lead me to him. Jim, I saved my inheritance when you spent yours. I'm pretty wealthy, the kind of wealth and position a woman of Neely's position must have. You owe it to her to help me."

"I don't owe her anything except six years of heat and loneliness in the desert," Cort said harshly. "Not that I'm kicking. It was the best thing she could have done for me. I came out of it a certain type of man—maybe not your kind, but suitable to me. Maybe she did me a favor."

"Good. That's better yet. She did you a favor," H a r d y said, almost eagerly. "So I'll speak plainly, Jim. Take me and my men to Geronimo—no matter where he is, even across the Mexican line—and there's twenty-five thousand dollars in gold waiting for you."

Cort already had rifle and slicker roll in his hands. He had been watching for Hardy to finish. Now he leaned over and blew out the lamp. His voice came through the darkness.

"That's the Military men's job, Bert. You said so yourself today."

"You're refusing?"

"No. I'm just telling you to go to hell."

15

HE WENT out and Major Hardy sat there in the darknesss for a few moments, suffering the bitterest disappointment of his life. A Colonel's eagles almost certainly within his grasp in a year or so, increased p r e s t i g e as the fastest-rising young officer in the west—Neely to add prestige and share his—and it was gone, blown out like the light had been blown out by Cort, because that hard, bitter man had refused Hardy's offer of gold.

Hardy got up and went out, closing the door behind him. He started down the hallway, and saw Lon Pearson standing in the doorway of his own room. The raider grinned as the officer started on by, after a curt nod.

"Come in," invited Pearson, grinning again. "You look all upset."

"Thank you, but I haven't time," Hardy said stiffly.

"I've had an ear cocked at this door for the past five minutes. You and Cort forgot to close yourn, so come down off that Military high horse, Major, and come on in. Maybe you can get them eagles yet."

Something about the man's words caused Hardy to accept. He went in, and this time the occupant of a room closed the door. Hardy saw with surprise that the outlaw, too was packing. Pearson caught the look.

"Yep, I'm pullin' out tonight," he said. "No reason for me to stay around, now that the Andersons have bought the ranch. Anyhow, I got busi-

ness of my own to attend to. Sit down, Major. I'm goin' to talk."

Hardy sat down. He looked at the raider. "Well?" he demanded crisply.

Pearson sat down opposite him, in a big chair "You just sit back an' listen while I talk. I reckon you know by now that Cort an' me ain't friends, even if we didn't go at each other's throats tonight. I got a score to settle with him. It's private an' we won't have to talk about it."

"It won't be necessary," Hardy said coldly "I heard the conversation at the table this evening. You tried to ambush him and one of your men got killed and another wounded. So, sir, whatever you have to say, I'm willing to listen for a moment before joining the others on the vernada."

"You'll listen longer than that," chuckled the raider. "I got plenty to say, and you'll like it, I think. I ain't fooled a bit by that new friendship business between you and Cort. You both hate each other—you in particular because he turned down your offer to lead him to Geronimo."

Hardy was interested despite the contempt he held for the outlaw. "Do *you* know where he is?" he asked bluntly.

"I wish I did," grinned Lon Pearson. "I'd take that twenty-five thousand gold of yourn in a hurry. No, this is something else. Like you and Cort, I'll speak plain. I heard this gal of yourn talkin' to Miz Batton in the kitchen little while ago when I come by. They was by themselves except for a couple of Mexican women washin' dishes, an' who couldn't understand English. This gal you want to marry is all busted up because of Cort. She's in love with him and *you know it!* You won't come out and say it, but deep down on the inside of you *you know it!* You're on pins and needles, just hoping that he'll pull out in a few days like he says he will and leave you a clear trail. But she's a beautiful woman, and I'll bet you a hundred dollars that all that old feeling he had for her in the old days—I heard her tell Miz Batton all about it—has come back. And, Mister, you ain't got a chance, if it has. You ain't got a chance. Not unless you and me do something about it. Well?" he demanded

"I'm listening," snapped Hardy. "Get to the point."

"You want promotion and you want this gal Neely. And I'll bet a thousand this time that you can't get her as long as he's around—not unless something is done about it. I can do something about it. I can have Cort arrested right here on this ranch and put in irons by a United States Marshal; or, better yet, let you do the job. Ha! You look kinda interested now, Major. Here's how it works. Back in the desert are sixty alien Chinese. They was brought from China on a ship called the Sally Ann, the same ship Sailor Morton was first mate on. They was unloaded off the coast of Mexico onto a schooner owned by a Mexican merchant and smuggler named Valesquez, who delivers Cort jewels and stuff—includin' that silk you took. Valesquez sent 'em up the Gulf of California to the mouth of the Rio de la Concepcion. From there they was put in flat boats and taken to Cort's camp up the river. They're mine, of course, not his. He won't smuggle Chinese.

"But I knew he was on his way to Tucson to sell about sixty thousand dollars worth of Emeralds, along with that silk you grabbed; so I went south to his camp and took delivery on them Chinese. We're workin' 'em across the desert slow, at night, on foot. I was going to have a Marshal step in and grab them, and frame Cort for it. But just supposin' that about the time this house party got under way them Chinese showed up here on this ranch? You could round 'em up with your soldiers, put Cort in irons as the man who smuggled them in, and then back track to his camp to prove it. You just got one of his pack trains and killed some Apaches. It would look kinda good if you got sixty of 'his' Chinese and arrested him, wouldn't it? You get more credit as an efficient officer, the gal Neely changes her mind about Cort in a hurry and goes to you, and Cort goes to a Federal penitentiary for about fifteen or twenty years. How does it sound?"

Hardy was a man of decision; he

made one now. He looked at the raider. "How much?" he asked.

"Five thousand bargain price, since I'm squaring up with Cort," was the reply.

"It's a deal," Hardy said. "And if you breathe a word of this, Pearson, I'll never stop until the cavalry has hunted you down like we're hunting these Indians."

"Fair enough," agreed the raider.

They began working out details.

NEELY Anderson went to bed that night about ten. The long ride by stage and hack, the excitement, the sudden turn of events that found Cort and Hardy both on the ranch—they produced a soundness of sleep that kept her supine until after eight the next morning. She rose, dressed, and went out into the big ranch house. The place appeared deserted until she went into the big kitchen and saw her mother talking with Mrs. Batton while several Mexican women peeled potatoes, cut meat, and otherwise made preparation for the noon meal.

"I'm hungry," she announced.

"Well!" exclaimed her mother. "You ought to be. Sleeping in like this."

"Where is everybody so early?"

Mrs. Batton let go with a peal of laughter. "Lord amighty, girl, it's late. Everybody has been up around here for hours. You're on a ranch now. Pa and your father have gone after Kitty. Your pa's going to make her an offer on the place. Major Hardy is down with his men. One of the boys left at daylight to go to Tucson after Red to come out here and take Jim's place."

"Where is Jim?" Neely asked quickly.

"He rode out at sunup with the boys to get the lay of the ranch. He knows it pretty well, but there's a few things he wants to find out so's he can pass them along to Red when he gets here with his wife. We've got a big 'dobie cabin all ready for them. Now you set down there and have a cup of coffee and I'll have one of the girls fix you some breakfast."

"I expect," Neely smiled, "that I'd better start getting up with the rest of you. But I was tired. I never slept so hard in my life."

She finished breakfast and went out to look the place over, wandering down by the barns. Lon Pearson was nowhere around, and for this she was glad; she didn't like the way the raider's bold eyes played over her.

She looked out across the field to where the Mexicans worked, and listened to the chug of the big steam engine pumping water into the tanks and for the irrigation of the alfalfa. Presently she returned to the house and then went down across the wide expanse in front of it to where the cottonwoods lay below. She saw Hardy, and she saw troopers busy soaping saddles and cleaning their guns. Their eating equipment lay on spread out blankets in the sun, scrubbed and shiny. Hardy saw her coming and came to meet her, his hat off.

"You look lovely," he greeted.

"Thank you, Bert. But I'm restless. I feel mean, sleeping in this way while everybody else was already up and gone. What are you doing?"

"Getting the troopers ready for inspection of equipment."

"Why?" she wanted to know.

He smiled at that one, patronizingly. "It's like this, darling. An idle trooper is a grumbling trooper. But if he's kept busy under strict discipline, he has no time for grumbling. It's discipline. So I keep them busy putting equipment in tip top shape."

"But I thought they were here to rest?" she asked.

"They're resting. Sergeant Toland!"

"Yes, sir."

Toland came up, throwing a sharp salute. "Sergeant, inspection of equipment and mounts at ten sharp. Extra duty for any trooper whose equipment is not up to standard."

"Yes, sir."

TOLAND saluted and Hardy walked with her back toward the big house. He was spending every minute possible with her, she knew. They went into the big living room and she played the piano and sang until time for him to go back to his men. At eleven o'clock she heard the sounds of rattling harness in the lane and

looked out. The big hack was coming up at a trot, and she saw the girl sitting in the back seat. Neely stood there as the rig came to a halt and Batton helped Kitty Larrabee down.

"Major, this is Kitty Larrabee, who is coming to live here for awhile. Anderson just bought her out, lock, stock, and barrel—and a good bargain he got. I'll have to send one of the boys over to batch on her place and look out after things. Kitty, Major Hardy."

"How do you do," the girl murmured.

"Now I know this place is paradise," Major Hardy laughed gallantly. "Two pretty women in one place at the same time. I'm glad you and Neely are not both at the fort; you would wreck discipline."

Neely had come down. She saw lovely brown hair, brown eyes, and a face just freckled enough to make it a little more attractive. But there was more than that: a certain character that showed courage, determination, and latent sorrow. In that moment Neely Anderson's heart went out to the girl, as they were introduced.

They all went toward the house and Kitty took the room vacated by Jim Cort. Neely went in with her to help arrange her things.

"This was Cort's room until he moved down with the men last night," Neely said. "He's father's new foreman."

"Yes, Bat told me," Kitty replied. She used the word "Bat" in speaking of the rancher as naturally as though speaking of someone her own age. "Where is Jim?"

"Out on the ranch somewhere. They've sent for Red, the stage driver, who brought us from Tuscon to Vail to come out and take over. Jim's leaving."

"Leaving?" gasped out Kitty a little too quickly, and Neely felt all tight inside. "When?"

"As soon as Red takes over. You've known him a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, Neely. He rode by a couple of days after my husband was killed. Bat and Mrs. Batton had come over with some of their men to help bury him. Jim stayed on the place for a few days while I went to Tucson. I had to get away. I couldn't stand it. I thought I didn't want to come back, but we had started that place as mere kids; and, anyhow, there wasn't anything else to do. I haven't any parents."

"What you need to do is get married again."

Kitty smiled at that one; she almost laughed. "I had plenty of offers. Cowboys, prospectors, and one bank robber who offered to go straight. He was shot and I nursed him back to health. And the soldiers, too; there was a handsome Lieutenant from the fort who always came to see me at every opportunity, but they shipped him to another post."

The two went out again. Neely didn't want to talk with Hardy. She felt a strange restlessness. They went down past the bunkhouse toward the corrals, and it was about then that Cort and another rider came up. Neely saw him look at the girl as he rode over. He swung down with a single lithe step and removed his hat.

"Kitty, I'm glad. I can sleep better now, knowing you're here."

"I wanted to thank you for the two horses, Jim," Kitty smiled. "I sold the place to Mr. Anderson this morning —everything. But not those two horses. I'll keep them to ride."

The dinner gong had rung. Neely said, "Jim, won't you come over and eat with us."

"Thanks," he said, and again it was the flat, emotionless man speaking. "I reckon I'll eat with the boys."

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DURING the next few days the Circle B took on an air of festivity, with a tense and growing excitement. Word had been sent out to surrounding ranches. Haines and the Double Arroyo outfits and several smaller neighbors would be there in full force. Ace's folks had come back from Tombstone and would come

over. There was a fat young yearling in the milk pen, eating its head off at a trough filled with grain, alfalfa, and milk mush, while the Mexicans dug a barbeque pit and laughed while they worked. Anderson had found an old pair of leather chaps somewhere and was riding around the ranch on a gentle pony, as proud as a school boy. Hardy kept his men busy on night guard and on patrols that were unnecessary while he spent all possible time with Neely and Kitty, who by now were fast friends. Sergeant Toland had begun to make excuses to come up to the house, and to talk with Kitty.

"I think the man's in love," Hardy laughed to Neely. "Not that I don't blame him, darling. Love is a wonderful thing. If he and Kitty got married, perhaps I could recommend him for a commission as a Second Lieutenant; we could even make it a double wedding."

Neely hadn't answered that one. She and Kitty rode together almost every day, partly because Neely loved it and partly because she hoped to run into Cort. She seldom saw him. He was out, seemingly, from dawn until dark, and he never came about the house anymore. He stuck strictly with the men, eating in their cook shack.

And then Red showed up one day. He drove a wagon, his wife in the seat beside him, a Winchester across his knees. In the back of the wagon, piled high with household belongings, were three impish looking boys of seven, nine, and eleven respectively. They were all red headed.

He rolled into the yard in front of the house and his "whoa, blast you!" to the team might have been a yell at his stagecoach four. He got down and Batton came out to grip his hand.

"Hello, Bat," the ex-stage driver greeted warmly. "Where's this job I'm supposed to do? So this is yore layout? Allus wanted to see it. Where is Jim?" The three "muchachos" had jumped down and were looking the place over as Red's buxom wife descended. The Anderson's came out, and Red shook hands all around.

"Howdy, Miss," he greeted Neely. "I see you didn't turn grey-headed from that purty red after the little fracas we had on the way to Vail."

"Little," gasped out Neely, laughing. "I was never so scared in my life."

"Neither was I," Red admitted seriously. "I knowed what was comin' up. They shot Ace off the seat first. They coulda got me as well, an' they coulda got any of the hosses from ambush when they got Ace. But them devils like their sport; they wanted to git rid of Ace first, then chase us a bit till they could down one of the wheelers or a lead hoss. Then they'da knocked me off the seat with a shot an' gone to work on the passengers. Thet big devil comin' up at a run on the off side was gettin' ready to shoot one of the wheelers, knowing my six shooter was empty an' I couldn't handle a Winchester with one hand. That was when Jim busted in. Lordy, I never was so glad to see a man in my life. The minute he comé poundin' outa the greasewood with that repeater in his hands I knowed things was goin' to be all right—even if the damned cavalry was late. Howdy Major."

Hardy's face was all poker as he stuck out his hand. Red's words had bitten deep. His wife was looking around.

Mrs. Batton said, "I'll have one of the Mexicans drive your stuff out to the new house. You folks come on in and have some coffee."

"Sounds good," Red agreed. "I could use some. I got my old saddle in the back end of that wagon. It'll feel good to get a hoss under me—hey!" he bellowed in a bull lunged roar. "You, Wyatt, git down off the top of that house! Poke, you and Willie come down outa that tree before I git a switch and bust all three of you."

They went inside and drank coffee and Red left to help unload the rest of the furniture. The house was a comfortable four-room adobe; two bedrooms, a combination living and dining room, and a kitchen with a big cook stove. Batton had built it with the idea of having a married foreman, but had discovered that when a man builds a ranch from the ground up he sometimes can't turn things over to a foreman. Batton had super-

vised everything himself, and the new house had lain vacant.

CORT RODE in at sundown with Hank and the rider LeRoy, who by now had returned. Ace was buried in Tombstone's boothill, one man who hadn't been killed there in a saloon gunfight. Cort was tired, dusty, and hungry. He swung down and saw Red, and a grin split his face. The first time that Neely, over by the milk pens where the Mexicans were busy with pails, ever had seen him really smile. The two men shook hands.

"So you got here, Red?" Neely heard him say. "I'm glad. I'll show you the ropes before I drift."

"Why the hell should you?" Red demanded belligerently. "No reason to, Jim. Why don't you stay on here as foreman? I told Anderson that maybe I'm gettin' too old to straddle a hoss anymore. I've allus been interested in this irrigation business. Hell, Jim, I could handle the fields and you could take care of the cattle. How come you got to go?"

They spoke low-voiced then, and Neely strained her ears to hear the words. She heard the name of "Red Calf" and the name of Lon Pearson.

"The hell you say!" Red ejaculated. "Like that, eh? What do you suppose is back of it?"

"I don't know," Neely heard Cort answer. "But it's trouble, Red; I don't like the looks of it."

"Neither do I. You reckon that stage robbin'—" and Red finished with an unprintable word, followed by others Neely couldn't hear because they were spoken in a lowered tone of voice.

"All right, Jim," Red finally said. "I'll keep my eyes open and my six-shooter handy. Like you, I don't like the looks of things."

Neely turned away from the corral, Kitty beside her. The other woman had heard too.

"What do you make of it, Kitty?" Neely asked.

"I don't know," Kitty replied. "But I'm like Red—I don't like the looks of it."

"Would it do any good for....you to ask Jim? I know it would be a waste of time for me. He hates me, Kitty. He won't even look at me. But you...he—"

"It might; I won't know until I try," the other answered. "You wait here and I'll go over and see him."

Neely saw her go over, saw the friendly greeting Cort gave the lovely Kitty, and again that pang shot through her. Cort was avoiding her as though she had the plague. And it had begun to rouse a rising resentment in her. She had almost thrown herself at him, tried in every way possible to tell him of her regret of things past, of her gratitude for saving the lives of her parents and herself. He had ignored her. That was why she was more genial and smiling toward Major Hardy.

Kitty came back. She shook her head. "He wouldn't say anything, Neely," she said. "He's never treated me like this before. He's always been so kind and considerate; now he's almost curt."

"He couldn't be kind to anybody," Neely flashed, her temper getting the best of her.

"That's where you're wrong. He's the finest man I ever met. For two years, after Bob was killed, he always stopped by going and coming from Tucson. He brought me things from town. He helped out in a dozen ways. Last spring, when a gang of horse thieves came through here, raiding the country, he sent some Indians up here to watch the place. Five of them. I never was so scared in my life the morning I went out to the corral and saw those five Apaches sitting their horses right by the milk pen I thought my heart would stop. Then one of them grinned and spoke to me and said something to the other four, making them stay behind. This one, Red Calf, came forward on his pony with a slip of paper in his hand. It was a note from Cort.

"The other four were Red Calf's brothers. They were to watch the house and stock until the gang of them went through. They did too. It was a funny feeling, going about the place and knowing that Apaches were watching me....every move I made. But I didn't lose any stock, and one day they simply disappeared. I told Cort just now I heard the name of

Red Calf. He scowled at me and said I'd better come back to you. I don't understand it, Neely."

"Well, I do," Neely answered angrily. She was Irish and she was a little proud of her temper. That temper was getting away from her. "All right, damn him, I'll hate him too. I'm glad he's leaving."

"No you're not, Neely. But—look, here comes the Major. I wish there was another like him around. I envy you."

Hardy came up and led the two of them away, playing the part of the gallant officer with one on each arm. He was in fine spirits. He had even relaxed a bit and allowed his men more levity, more leisure time around the house. Sergeant Toland had come up to the house for supper on two occasions; and Hardy made sure that the big, middle-aged sergeant was seated next to Kitty.

Preparations for the celebration went on. And back in the desert, twenty miles away, Lon Pearson lounged with his men and watched over the Chinese.

THEY were a pitiful, frightened group now, all under guard. Four of them—the four who had spoken English brokenly—were dead. The bearded outlaw Smith, whom Cort had wounded, had shot them. The haul in gold had been good; the aliens were richer than even Pearson had dreamed. Sailor Morton lounged about, taking his turn at guarding them, a borrowed Winchester over one arm. He swore oaths every time Cort's name was mentioned.

"You real shore," Smitty asked that day, as Pearson was saddling up, "this deal will go through like you planned?"

"Yep," grunted the raider, tightening his cinch. "It's all set. I'm goin' in now to see if Hardy got that five thousand like he promised. I'm meetin' him tonight at ten back of the corrals. If he delivers like he promised, then we'll deliver. I think he will. That means that 'party' they're havin' is going to have about *sixty* uninvited guests. Then we get the drop on Cort and put him in irons."

"And this sojer plays the big boy with the girl, hey?"

"Maybe," grinned the raider. "But if something happened to him, then I might have a clear field, eh? Just a thought, Smitty, just a thought. You watch the Chinese and follow orders. I'm heading north."

He mounted and dropped out of the hidden arroyo and presently struck the course of the river. The afternoon sun was midway toward the horizon but he had plenty of time. He rested his horse in the shade of a cottonwood, smoked for an hour, watered the animal, and resumed his journey. The sun went down and darkness came on. The moon was a little late now, but it was up by the time the raider pulled up half a mile from the Circle Bar ranch buildings and looked at his watch. A quarter hour left. Just time to make it. He went on at a walk, keeping to the deep shadows of the "alamos" and finally saw the outlines of the corrals with the lights of the ranch house and various other quarters beyond. Pearson approached the corrals at a walk, hand on his gun. Then he saw the shadow move and pulled up sharply.

"Hold it!" he called out sharply. "Don't move."

"Major Hardy," came the reply.

Hardy came out from where his body had been blended with the trunk of a giant cottonwood. He carried a heavy canvas sack in one hand.

"Got the money?" Pearson asked, low voiced.

"I gave you my word," came back the curt reply. "Where are the aliens?"

"Under guard a few miles from here. They'll be all over this ranch by day after tomorrow night when the party is in full blast. Gimme the money, Major."

"When you deliver the Chinese, Pearson. Don't try to pull a gun on me and take this; Sergeant Toland has you covered with a rifle. I merely brought it as evidence of good faith."

Pearson laughed. "All right, Major. But you're too cautious. You forgot I got a personal stake in this game with Cort; I wouldn't double-cross you. See you day after tomorrow night."

He turned and walked his horse away, disappearing into the moonlit night in the shadows of the cottonwoods. From somewhere nearby came the click of a rifle hammer being let down and Sergeant Toland came out of the shadows. He came up and grounded the butt of the single shot 45-70.

"All right, sergeant," Hardy said crisply. "Put this money back in the hiding place. And I think that within a few months you'll get that commission I want you to have."

"Yes, sir," Toland replied.

He took the heavy canvas bag. He was under orders, and he didn't like it at all. It was a hell of a way to get a commission; he hadn't wanted one in the first place.

But when a man served under Major Hardy he obeyed orders....and he kept his mouth shut.

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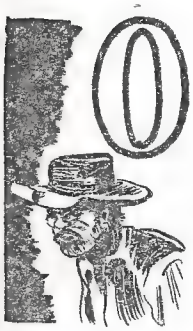

ON SATURDAY morning Cort shot the fat yearling through the head with a rifle and the Mexican ranch butcher, standing by with a sharp knife cut its throat. Cort and Red hooked on to it with their lariats and dragged it out of the corral and onto a big tarp spread out in the sun. Two other Mexicans went to work with knives and began skinning it. They gutted it and rolled out the entrails saving some of them for a delicacy known as son-of-a-b—, but called "son-of-a-gun" for the sake of politeness. The entrails, with parts of the liver and heart would be ground up and mixed with flour and certain other ingredients and cooked in a big cast iron wash pot. Over by the barbeque pit the red beans had been cooking since early morning. They would be cooked under a slow cottonwood fire for nearly fourteen hours before being allowed to simmer and cool.

By noon the cut up parts of the yearling already were turning on the spits over the fires, along with the carcass of a goat. The Mexicans liked their goat meat.

In the area just back of the kitchen, covering one hundred yards to the corrals, post holes had been dug and a line of tall posts set up forty feet apart in a huge circle. A wire had been strung between the posts. On this wire would hang the lanterns for illumination. Directly in the center the Mexicans had built a dance platform on two-by-fours, sixty feet across, with a small platform for the musicians. The big piano had been moved out of the living room and now reposed beneath quilts to protect it from the hot sun.

Nobody was working that day, except the soldiers. They were not idle, but they were grumbling.

"Dawg-gonnit, Sergeant Toland, I am plumb sore," one of the troopers growled to Toland that Saturday. "Here I been lookin' forward all week to doin' a hot fandango with some of them pretty Mexican gals, and what happens? We cain't go. We got to stand *guard* over the visitors in case *Apaches* show up! If you don't mind, I think I'll go down by the river where nobody can hear me and cuss the Major for awhile, right out loud. I've been wantin' to tell him off for a long time."

"I know how you feel," grunted the Sergeant, just as uncomfortable as the disgruntled trooper. "But in the Army you obey orders and you don't ask any questions. The Major says you'll stand guard with loaded rifles —and, by Gawd, you'll stand guard."

The afternoon wore on. The meat was browning on the spits now, the beans and "son of a gun" bubbling in the big cast iron kettles. A big table had been built near the barbeque pits. On this would be stacked meat, bowls of sour pickles, pickled chilis, peach-cobbler, and the huge pans of cornbread the Mexican women were busily cooking.

From hidden trunks in the Mexicans' cabins had come gaily colored cloth, and every dark skinned infant that could toddle had been decked out; the girls in gay dresses and rib-

bons, the boys in "charro" costumes. From all over the place came the chatter of Spanish, laughter, and talk from the big house. The "Old" Don and the "New" Don were certainly doing things up in style. The gay spirit was interrupted only once when Red's three muchachos got into a fight with a group of little Mexican boys and the ex-stage driver had to run, bellowing, to separate them.

Cort stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse and laughed harder than he had laughed in years as Red beswitched his three offspring in front of a group of grinning Mexican children.

BY THREE o'clock that afternoon the first of the visitors began to arrive. Neely went out to greet Haines and his wife, their daughter and her husband. Two riders had come with them, for they were a small outfit. John Sellers, owner of the Double Arroyo, put in appearance shortly afterward with their unmarried son and four DA punchers. In no time at all the Circle B seemed to be overrun with people of all sizes and ages, many of them Mexicans.

Neely tried to be every place at once, greeting visitors and welcoming them to the ranch. She heard talk of drouth, prices for cattle, Apaches, the silver being taken from Tombstone by the ton. She met a woman named Malden, and discovered that the visitor was Ace's mother.

"I'm glad to be here, Miss Anderson," the plain faced woman said. "I understand you were on the stage when the Indians killed Ace."

"Yes, I was, Mrs. Malden," Neely answered, not quite knowing what to say next.

"He was a good boy. He saved his money and sent part of it to us to help keep the place going. There was not a better boy ever lived."

"I'm sure of it, Mrs. Malden. If you will come inside, I'll show you where to put the children tonight when they get sleepy. It looks like all the rooms will be filled, but nobody will need them. The older Mexican women will watch over them while we dance. They say it will last until daylight."

"It will," Ace's mother smiled. "You don't know these western people—but you'll get to know them in time."

Afterward Neely found Kitty and they wandered down toward the corrals. The corrals were filled with saddle horses and teams, while all around the house were buggies, wagons, and even two ox carts. Over by the bunkhouse a dozen men were shooting dice; and from the sounds coming from within, Neely knew that a poker game was in progress.

She saw Cort. He was leaning against the wall of the bunkhouse, taking no part in the proceedings, his face as blank as ever.

"Hello, Jim," Kitty greeted warmly. "Just look at that crowd out there. We're going to have a time tonight."

"I imagine," he said.

"And don't you forget to dance with Neely and me. Understand?"

"I haven't been on a dance floor in six years, Kitty,' he answered, smiling. "I wouldn't know how anymore."

"We'll teach you, won't we, Neely?"

"If Jim wants to dance with me—like he used to in the old days," Neely smiled.

"Maybe one or two," Cort smiled back at her. He did want to dance with her; he wanted to hold her in his arms just as he had when they were so much younger. But his gear was all packed. He was pulling out in the morning. Red had told his wife and she had told the girls. They knew.

MAJOR HARDY came strolling up. "Hello, Jim," he said affably. "Looks like quite a celebration coming up tonight. I've just had a courier. A message from the Old Man himself. He heard about the celebration and will be here any time."

Hardy didn't say that he himself had sent one of his men to the fort with a note to the Colonel, for Hardy was playing it shrewdly. He wanted the Old Man himself present tonight when the soldiers rounded up those Chinese and Hardy put Cort in irons.

"Glad to hear it, Bert," Cort said

casually. "It should be a nice fandango. Your men don't often get an opportunity to dance with so many pretty girls. They undoubtedly will enjoy it."

"As a matter of fact," Major Hardy announced casually, "they won't be taking part in it. They'll be on guard."

Neely turned to him in surprise. Nearby a man on his knees had just let out a whoop as he raked in his winnings from a lucky throw of the dice.

"But why, Bert?" she asked.

He smiled at her patronizingly. "Neely, it is the job of the soldiers to protect the civilians out here. Just because the last bunch of raiders off the reservation have been accounted for doesn't mean that there aren't more, or some of the Sonora Apaches up from across the line. These lights strung on wires can be seen for miles. I can't risk it. I'd like to see my men relax and enjoy themselves, but duty comes first; they must stand guard."

"You standing guard with them?" Cort grinned sardonically.

"They will be in the charge of Sergeant Toland," Hardy said stiffly. "I have certain social obligations, as the officer in command."

He turned and left and Kitty laughed. Neely said, "Jim, I thought you and Bert were friends now. He told me so. What you said wasn't very kind."

"When are you leaving?" Kitty asked, though she and Neely already knew.

"In the morning," he said.

"Where to?"

"Tombstone first. After that...." he finished it with a shrug.

Hardy went back to his men to give certain last instructions to Sergeant Toland. The troopers would be allowed to go up and eat of the barbeque as soon as it was ready and then return for their weapons. A few of them would be stationed in plain sight. The others would be down by the corrals and in among the cottonwoods to catch and arrest the Chinese. Pearson's riders would flee at once—and the soldiers had strict orders not to fire upon them.

Hardy started back toward the ranch house, and then he saw the eight men in blue clattering into the yard. Sight of them made his heart leap. The Old Man had arrived with several junior officers.

Colonel Eblen swung down and shook hands with the host as the troopers came running to take the horses. There was hand shaking and saluting all around.

"Well, Colonel, this is a surprise," Batton greeted. "Glad to have you with us, sir. Of course, you'll stay all night, though you won't get much sleep. Don't know where we'll quarter your men, though. The rooms are filled up with kids. Anyhow, these young officers won't be interested in sleeping tonight. Not with all these purty gals here. Come along with me and I'll get Ma and we'll see about a place for you."

The officers with the Old Man went down to where their horses already had been taken. The Colonel followed Batton inside, bowed to Mrs. Batton, and presently found himself in a big, comfortably furnished room in the east wing, with his orderly.

"Send Major Hardy to me at once," he ordered.

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PRESENTLY Hardy came in. He saluted the Colonel.

"I'm glad you arrived, sir," the Major said.

"Sit down, Major. I want to talk with you. Now tell me what this is all about?"

Hardy sat down. This was one time he was at ease and not stiffly formal. He felt the weight of his new rank on his shoulders, and tonight would be the climax in his life.

"Very well, sir," he said. "You wanted results and I've been trying to get them for you. Now I'm getting more. You already have received my dispatch concerning the stage coach hold up by the remnants of the

Apaches we wiped out when I brought in Cort's smuggler pack train. We were hot on their trail—a matter of minutes—when they attacked the coach. But this man Cort had accidently happened there ahead of us and broke up the attack. My fiancee, Miss Anderson, whose parents have just bought this ranch, was on the coach with her parents. They were on the way here. I accompanied them for protection and to give my men a rest. While here I found out that Cort was bringing in sixty alien Chinese to deliver to Tucson. By the way, he's posing as the foreman of this ranch until his aliens arrive."

"When are they due?" the Colonel asked sharply.

"Sometime tonight, sir. He plans to slip them by the ranch, along the river, while the celebration is in progress."

"How did you find out all this, Major?" demanded the older man.

"My men have been out on daily patrols since we arrived here, sir," Hardy answered smoothly. "They discovered the men, came back and reported. I gave orders not to molest them, merely to keep them under observation. Then I happened to overhear Cort talking, and found out the aliens are due tonight. They are in the custody of a gang of desperadoes headed by a man named Lon Pearson. You've heard of him?"

"Of course," grunted the Colonel.

"He and Cort are supposedly enemies, but are actually partners," went on Hardly smoothly, thinking of that five thousand dollars he was not going to pay. And, had Cort accepted his proposition to lead Hardy to Geronimo, the new Major hadn't had any intention of paying that twenty-five thousand dollars either; not when he could bring in the body of the man he so hated. Pearson had been right: There would be no chance for Hardy with Neely until Cort was either disgraced or dead. "They'll both be here tonight. At the right moment I'm going to clap them both in irons. I wanted you to be here when it happens, sir. These ranchers are complaining that the Army isn't on the job. I wish to give them a convincing demonstration that we are."

"Very well, Major. I leave the matter in your hands. It is to be presumed that your plans are well laid."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now I'm hungry. I'm going to clean up and find out about something to eat."

"The barbeque is ready by now, sir. It's almost sundown and the dancing will begin at dark. They'll dance through until daylight. I'll wait for you outside and make the introductions."

HE LEFT and the orderly came in and went to work, shining the Colonel's boots. Hardy went outside. The lanterns, strung on the high wire, were lit and people were laughing and talking in little groups as they ate barbequed beef, beans, son of a gun, peach cobbler, and drank big cups of steaming black coffee. Screaming children seemed to be running around everywhere, playing tag, and Hardy saw his men eating hungrily before returning to their camp down among the cottonwoods to get their weapons. He saw the blue of the junior officers and spoke to a Lieutenant here and there. The night was warm and he was content.

He strolled off down by the corrals, half hoping to see Neely. What he saw was a big blond man on a horse come up and swing down. Lon Pearson. The raider saw him and let the reins dangle. He came over, grinning. Hardy's eyes went cold.

"What are you doing here?" he rapped out. "You ought to know better than to put in appearance at a time like this?"

"You ain't talkin' to one of your soldiers now, mister," grinned Pearson. "You give *them* the orders. You dam' well better not waste any breath giving *me* any, because I don't take 'em from any man. I'm here because I wouldn't miss this shindig for all the Chinese in China. I see they got a liquor keg set up over there for the visitors. That's for me. It'll sharpen my appetite for supper. I'm hungry."

"Where are your Chinese aliens?" snapped back the officer.

"I left 'em comin' this way this afternoon. Smitty's pushin' them hard

to get here about nine o'clock when the festivities are in full swing. We'll shove 'em up right against the corrals and then my men will light out. The rest is in your hands. You just be damned sure none of them soldiers of yourn get over-anxious on the trigger finger and plug some of my men. They could shoot the Sailor, if they wanted to; he's pretty upset because he hasn't got a chance to make Cort cough up that forty-five thousand in gold Cort's Apache Indian stole. I told the fool he might as well forget it, but he's still grumbling. Well, I'm going over for a drink."

Hardy frowned and watched him go. He had told the Colonel that he was going to arrest Pearson. Actually, he had no such intention. Pearson, as prisoner, would talk and bring a military investigation. Toland had orders to shoot the raider for resisting arrest, if Hardy failed to do so. The officer consoled his conscience by thinking that he was doing the people of the territory a favor—which was the truth. The man was a raider, robber, horse-thief, smuggler, and likely a murderer. The territory would be better off without him, and Hardy wanted the credit.

Those three passions—promotion, Neely, and wealth—still dominated his life more than ever, and he would let nothing stand in the way.

He went to find the Colonel. As he walked toward the big sprawling adobe ranch house he saw Jim Cort. Cort was striding toward the barbeque table where Lon Pearson was helping himself. Both men wore pistols.

Cort came up and looked at the raider. "I told you to keep off this ranch from now on," he said in a low voice. "You're not welcome here."

"I know it," grinned back Pearson. "But I ain't worried. You're too plumb good-mannered to make a ruckus here in front of all these people, an' you know it, Cort. I knowed it too. Batton wouldn't like to see his last shindig on the ranch busted up in a gun-fight that you'd lose. So I come on in, and you ain't going to do a thing about it. Batton won't like it either, but he won't say anything."

"I know he won't. He knows like I do—that nobody but a damned bushwhacking road agent and horse thief would have the crust to do it."

"Sure I got gall—I'm made of it," chuckled the raider, spooning up more beans from the cast-iron wash pot. "And you can call me all the names you want and I won't do anything about it—tonight. After tonight, when we meet, you'd better come shooting. I'm squaring up for my men."

DOWN BY the house the Colonel had just emerged. Hardy nodded with a jerk of his head. "There they are, sir. The wiry-looking man on the left is Jim Cort—the former James Van Cortland—whose pack train of silk I captured. The other is Pearson the raider, who's bringing in the Chinese tonight. They're probably discussing plans for the night and how to get the aliens by here without being seen. Cort is already packed to leave in the morning, supposedly heading for Tombstone. What he actually plans to do is catch up with Pearsons' men who are herding the Chinese."

"What is their destination?" the Colonel asked.

"Tuscon, sir. There's a Dutchman who owns a store there who deals with the smugglers. He buys their silks and jewels and 'dobie dollars, and anything else the smugglers like Cort bring in. I presume he'll take these Chinese and send them out in little groups to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, to the friends they have waiting."

"I see. Very well, Major. I'm here merely as a guest. I presume that the matter can be left in your hands."

"It can, sir; there will be no slip-up. My men are on guard in a circle around the ranch. They have been alerted. We'll take over the Chinese and then I'll put Cort and Pearson in irons."

"Very well. Here comes Mr. Batton."

Batton came up with Anderson and grinned. "Well, I see you're all slicked up for the dance, Colonel," the rancher greeted. "But you look hungry. Come on over and try some of that son-of-a-gun. Ain't nobody in the

world can make it like my Mexican butcher."

"Son-of-a-gun?" asked the Colonel. "I seem to remember vaguely hearing of it. What's it made of?"

"Calf guts," said the rancher, and then went off into booming laughter at the look on the Colonel's face.

They went toward the table to get plates and scoop up food from the big kettles. Cort was striding back toward the bunk house, and Neely saw him go. She had witnessed his conversation with Pearson.

She walked past the circle of lighted lanterns and followed him. She wanted to talk with him. He had deliberately avoided her, and now he was leaving in the morning. And she did not want him to go. That flash of Irish temper long since had gone; she knew only that she loved him, that he was leaving, and that nothing in the world seemed to be able to sway the hard-faced, implacable man who had been James Van Cortland.

He was going down by the corrals and she walked after him. Laughter came from the bunkhouse where the poker game had been in progress for hours, and would continue on until daybreak. Horses and mules dozed in the corrals, some still harnessed. She saw Cort go by the end of the corral and disappear and she came up by a corner of it—and a scream that never came welled up in her throat as she saw the Apache Indian.

He stood some forty yards away in the shadows of a big cottonwood tree. He was in full war paint, with that terrible looking ocre streak of paint laterally across his cheeks and nose below the fierce eyes. She wanted to cry out, to warn Cort, but fear left her frozen.

Then the Indian stepped into view with the rifle in his hands. She saw Cort turn at the sound of a *hoo-hoo* and walk towards the man. They spoke rapidly in Spanish and she heard harsh, guttural answers.

Then the Indian was gone like a fleeting shadow.

Neely turned and almost fled back toward the platform where the musicians were beginning to tune up.

19

THE BIG piano had been uncovered and now reposed beside the raised platform where three Mexicans with guitars and a rancher with a fiddle were turning up. One of the women visitors was seating herself on the stool. They finished tuning and then Red walked out in the center of the dance floor.

"Git pardners for a square!" he bellowed. "There's room for two, so we'll make it a double square!"

There was a scramble on the part of cow punchers and ranchers for women pardners. The floor filled almost at once with two groups of eight each. Four men faced four women pardners at one end of the floor and four other men faced their women pardners at the other end. Red stood in the center. Around the platform nearly one hundred men and women and children stood ringed.

The music struck up.

"Circle four in the middle of the floor," Red roared out and the mill started.

Red stood there bawling out instructions to the dancers.

"do-ci-do. A little more dough, A little more dough," he chanted.
"Take yore pardner, pat her on the head.
If she don't like biscuits, feed 'er cornbread."

Followed by,

"Hawg eatin' feed in a pen six palings high,
If I'se that hawg, I'd git out or die.
Whoop-souie!"

The dancers swung, do-ci-doe'd,

and continued the fast pace. The music didn't stop. You didn't stop music in a square dance until the dancers grew tired. Ten minutes later a man swinging his pardner let out a shrill whistle. It was taken up in chorus by the others and the music came to a halt. They had had enough. Sweating, panting men and women cleared the dance floor, mopping their faces with bandanas. The music struck up again, a waltz this time. Neely saw Major Hardy coming toward her to claim the first dance, and she saw Cort at the edge of the crowd. He was smoking a cigarette, his face expressionless. He wore a gunbelt, the heavy pistol low at his right thigh. She had somehow hoped that he would be the first to ask her to dance. She saw Kitty in the arms of a handsome young Second Lieutenand she felt Major Hardy's arms enfold her as they floated across the floor in time to the music.

Over his shoulder she saw Cort again, and she remembered his conversation with that wild Apache in full war paint. She stifled an inner shudder, her woman's intuition telling her that something was in the wind. She could sense it. It was in the very air itself.

Hardy looked down at her lovely face, smiling. "This is the kind of thing I've dreamed about, Neely," he said. "You in my arms again. We give dances at the fort once a month. You will have plenty to occupy your time there. I want you to come over and visit us right away and inspect the place. You'll like it there, Neely."

"I'm sure it's a nice place," she said, and they danced on.

The dance rolled on. A stream of people made regular trips to the big table to eat, and others—all men—went to the whiskey keg to drink from tin cups. The bold, swaggering Lon Pearson claimed Kitty for a dance, and she couldn't refuse him. Pearson had put his gun away somewhere. You didn't dance with a gun on at a ranch house celebration; it was a violation of custom and good manners. Kitty was the center of attention from all the young officers, who were fighting to get her as a pardner, Neely saw, and she was glad; Kitty needed love. She needed one of these clean-cut young officers, to follow where ever he was sent. She was glad.... until she saw Cort, gun-belt gone, striding across the floor toward where she and Kitty stood.

A young officer had just asked her for a dance, but Neely appeared not to hear, talking with Kitty; stalling until Cort got there. She would tell the Lieutenant that she already had this dance.

Cort came toward them, his hat off, his blond hair slicked down and gleaming in the light of the lanterns hanging from the wires overhead. The harshness in his face had momentarily been replaced by a smile of pleasure.

"Kitty," he said, "It's been six years, but if you want to give it a try I'll try not to step on your toes."

"The way you say that, Jim, sounds like you're saying goodbye," Kitty said.

"It is," he said, "I'm leaving in the morning. I've got a few things to take care of."

NEELY LET the young officer take her, sharp disappointment shooting through her. It was increased when, a few minutes later, she saw Cort at the edge of the crowd again. His gunbelt was strapped around his waist once more. She went to him, breaking away from the officers, and came up to where he stood smoking a cigarette. Red was assembling dancers for another double square.

"Jim," she said, "don't you think you're doing me a bit of injustice?"

"How?" he asked.

"Ignoring me in front of all these people who have now accepted me as one of them. Look at father over there—chatting away with those ranchers about feed and cattle and water holes as though he'd been out here all his life. Look at mother—coming from the house with ranch women who've been in to see about their babies. And you haven't even had the courtesy to ask me to dance with you?"

He didn't tell her of the fear within him—the knowledge that he was in love with her as of old, that he was remembering the past, that he was afraid he might weaken...and lose out to Major Hardy.

He masked his feelings in harshness. "You seemed to be doing pretty good with Bert," he said. "He's had you for every other dance. In between the young officers from the fort have been fighting over you. Why should I interrupt?"

"I went down to the corrals at dark to see you, after you finished talking with Lon Pearson. I knew you had just told him he wasn't welcome. I wanted to ask you not to have any trouble here tonight for our sakes—to let him stay. Then I saw that terrible Apache Indian. Jim, what does it mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped the cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it with his boot heel. "That was Red Calf, my Apache helper, in the smuggling. He was here on business. Kitty knows him, so you can forget it."

"But he was in full war paint," she whispered.

"Yes," he said stonily, "he was in full war paint."

"Jim, what is it?" she asked. "What did it mean? There's trouble coming and I know it. Look at Pearson. He's wearing his gunbelt again and he's uneasy. And Bert—he's acting strangely."

"He's not acting strangely now. Here he comes to claim you for the next dance," Cort said.

Hardy came through and hooked a possessive arm through Neely's. He was all smiles. "Jim, if you're not going to dance with her, you haven't the right to keep the prettiest girl in Arizona out here talking with you. Come along, darling. This is our dance."

She danced the number with him, and she watched the crowd; Pearson with his gun belt on, his eyes flicking to Cort; Hardy watching both men. There was violence and tragedy in the air and she knew it. There was going to be trouble before the night was over. Cort had warned Pearson that his presence wasn't welcome, and the man was here. There was that horribly painted Apache Indian who had spoken Spanish to Cort under the the cottonwood down back of the corral. And he had seen Hardy glance at his big watch a number of times.

They finished the dance and Hardy went over to the Colonel. He had his watch in his hand.

"It's almost time, sir," he said. "Another half hour."

"Were are your men?"

"Stationed around the ranch in a circle, ready to close in. The aliens should put in appearance almost any time now. Then I'll shackle Cort. I'd better get my revolver, sir," and the Colonel lost the glance Hardy sent toward Pearson.

"Very well, Major. You know your business."

"My plans are well made, sir. After tonight the worst smuggler and the worst outlaw gang of desperadoes in Arizona will be cleaned out. And the Army will have sixty captured alien Chinese on its reports to Washington. I truly regret that the General isn't here tonight; he would appreciate the work we're doing."

The half hour passed, and then an hour. The Colonel was fidgeting, casting glances at Hardy. Nothing had happened so far. Hardy was not dancing now.

Then, shortly before eleven, it happened. Red was in the middle of a square dance, calling instructions, when the music suddenly stopped with a crash.

Hoof beats sounded, and a hundred pairs of eyes turned as a sweat drenched horse loped past the corrals and into the circle of light.

IT CARRIED two riders. One of them, a black-bearded man of about forty, sat back of the cantle, holding another in the saddle. The other man was Sailor Morton. The front of his big chest was covered with blood and he was swaying. A woman screamed and the black-bearded, gun-packing man slid to the

ground. He caught Morton as the Sailor toppled from the saddle, easing him to the ground on his back.

"What's going on here?" Batton roared, pushing through. "Git back, folks! Git back!"

Morton was wheezing and gasping and working a big hand over his bloody chest. The squat, black bearded man straightened as Lon Pearson came through the crowd.

"Lon, we're wiped out!" he cried hoarsely. "Apaches! They hit us a little while ago and got every man. Morton an' me got away into the desert. We had hell gittin' here. He's dyin'."

"Not yet," gasped out the Sailor. "I'll live to slit a few throats yet."

"Apaches!" snapped out Hardy. "Where?"

"They're back a ways. I—"

And then women and children screamed and men cried out hoarsely as five savage looking figures stepped into the circle of light behind Jim Cort.

"Look out, Jim—look out!" Neely screamed. "Behind you. Indians!"

"Sergeant Toland!" bellowed Hardy. "Toland!"

"Hold it, Bert," rapped out Cort. "Your men are in custody, bound and gagged but not hurt."

Pearson had slipped into the circle and stood beside the black bearded Smith. They were looking at Cort, hands close to their gun butts.

"So you brought these murdering, red devils in here—to this ranch," Hardy said to Cort. "You're under military arrest. I've got a pair of schakles waiting for you, Cort."

"Yes, I brought them here for two reasons," Cort said and turned to one of the murderous looking Indians who stood with rifles in their hands. It was Red Calf and his four brothers.

Cort spoke rapid Spanish and the Indian turned. A sharp, shrill cry broke from him. It was answered from all around as a dark mass of men—Chinese—appeared down by the corrals. Then from all sides, seemingly out of the very night itself, rose nearly one hundred Apaches in full war paint, ringing the frightened women and children and sending cold chills down the spines of the helpless men.

They closed in; omnious, silent, big single shot 45-70's in their hands.

"Jim, what's the meaning of this?" Batton roared. "Why the hell do you—"

"Hold it, Bat," Cort said quietly. He turned to the Colonel, his face stony. "I believe you have an explanation coming, sir."

"I believe the Army does," replied Colonel Eblen.

"Don't believe him, sir," Hardy broke in, and Neely saw fear in his face. "There's the evidence I told you of. Sixty Chinese he smuggled in."

Cort looked down at Sailor Morton and a brittle grin came to his hard face. "Morton, you double-crossed me and I made you pay for it; tell the Colonel who smuggled in these aliens."

"It was Pearson," got out the big man with the yellow beard, still on his back on the ground. "Only him and Major Hardy were going to frame Cort and put him in irons tonight. Hardy paid Pearson five thousand for the job."

"It's not true, sir," Hardy shot back. "That man—" He was pointing at Cort with levelled finger, and the finger was trembling. Back of Cort the stolid looking Apaches with the streaks of ocre paint across their cheeks and hooked noses waited, fingering their rifles.

Cort sneered, ignoring him, and said to the Colonel, "A short time ago I quit the smuggling business, sir. On my final trip that man on the ground found out there were sixty Chinese merchants and other men of considerable wealth aboard the schooner in the gulf. He should have known about them; he was first mate on the ship that brought them from China and later up the coast to the gulf. He stole a pack train of mine loaded with silk and tried to get away during a fight between Apaches off the reservation and a group of

Hardy's men. Hardy there captured the train—not forgetting to hold out a couple of bolts of the silk for a certain lady.

"Morton joined Pearson's gang of desperadoes, and they went back to my hidden camp down in Sonora and brought in these Chinese. They were too damned stupid not to realize that my Indian helper, Red Calf—" and he pointed to one of the Indians back of him—"was watching their every move. Red Calf burned the breeze north and told me about it. So I sent him back to Sonora after about a hundred men of his tribe to keep the Chinese and their guards under observation but not to attack. They followed my instructions."

HE PAUSED, his bold eyes on Pearson and the black-bearded Smith. On the ground Sailor Morton was, despite being shot through, grinning like a gargoyle.

"And?" prompted the Colonel in a curiously quiet tone of voice.

"They followed my instructions, sir; they stood by and watched while that black-bearded man there by Pearson shot four of the Chinese who could speak a little English and robbed the others—a crime for which I was to be blamed by Hardy. Hardy had come to me and offered me twenty-five thousand dollars if I'd lead him to Geronimo and help capture him; he said that you're retiring next year and that if he could bring in Geronimo he'd get your job and command of Fort Huachuca. He—"

"It's not so, sir!" cried out the Major.

"You're a liar, Bert," Cort said calmly. "I overheard you and Pearson framing it up in his room here in the house, when you thought I'd gone to the bunkhouse. You're paying him five thousand dollars to have your men push those Chinese into the middle of this celebration tonight so you could clap me in irons in front of all these people and the Colonel." He turned to the Colonel, though Neely, standing frozen, saw his hand laying close to the big pistol at his hip. The Apaches had closed in now in a solidly packed ring. They could not understand what was going on, but Red Calf had told them what was in the wind; and this strange white man *jeem corte* was their friend. He had refused white man's gold to betray their leader, Geronimo.

"So Red Calf reported to me every night," Cort went on relentlessly, "and tonight, following my instructions, these Apaches descended on the camp where the Chinese were now prisoners and wiped them out. But Morton and that man who brought him in seems to have gotten away."

Neely stood there, her hand on her father's arm, Kitty's strong clasp in her own. She saw in the glow of the lanterns the ring of vicious-looking Apaches, the silent, frightened women and children, and Cort facing Pearson and his segundo. She saw his harsh face, heard the relentless words that were destroying the career of an overly-ambitious Army Major.

"I see," she heard the Colonel answer softly. "I'm beginning to see a lot of things now. But that still does not explain why these Indians are here in what could turn into a massacre if they got out of control."

Cort said tonelessly, "They want Lon Pearson, that outlaw leader who, among other things, held up the Tombstone-to-Tucson stage a short time back."

"You're a liar," snarled Pearson. "I never—"

"Yo're another!" roared Red from the edge of the crowd. "I was drivin' thet stage an' I recognized you, you dirty—" and Red spat out an unprintable word. "Thet mask didn't fool me. I'd know you anywhere."

"What do they want me for?" gasped our Pearson.

Cort ignored him, still talking to the Colonel. "Last year, Pearson and some of his raiders were down across the line in Mexico, trying to find my camp and get my gold cache. They ran into a small band of Apache women and children going to a new camp.

Pearson took one of the girls for himself—and then cut her throat with a knife when she fought him. That's one of the reasons they're here tonight."

"Damn you, Cort—" Pearson half screamed.

And then Neely saw him, and the black-bearded man, half crouch, hands flashing to their hips. The night was split by gun flashes and the roars of six shooters. She saw flame spurts lashing out from Cort's hip, saw him half stagger back, and then keep on firing. The black-bearded man was down, coughing out his life, and Pearson had dropped to one knee, fumbling for his fallen gun. He half rose to his feet and pitched forward to lie face down.

Slowly Cort sheathed the smoke wisping six shooter. He had an odd look on his face. He turned to the Colonel. "The other reason they're here—these Apaches, sir, is because one of them is representative of Geronimo, who is hiding in Mexico. He wants to come in and talk. Red Calf!"

The Apache stepped forward and Cort spoke to him in Spanish, an odd tone in his voice. Red Calf turned and spoke gutturally in Apache, and a man stepped into the circle of firelight. He was fully six feet two inches in heights, and the cowhide head dress, adorned with two curved horns, proclaimed him some kind of a warrior chief. He spoke gutturally to the Colonel, Red Calf translated in Spanish, and Cort said in English, "Geronimo wants to have a talk with the General, sir. These men will return to Sonora tonight with any message you have."

The world was clouding up and he felt his legs beginning to get weak. He had to get out of there, something in his brain kept telling him. He had to...

He turned, stumbled, and Neely's scream cut the night as he fell into the arms of Red Calf.

"He's shot! He's shot!" she was crying out, and he felt her arms around him as darkness blotted out the lights of the lanterns strung high on wires between the poles.

HE CAME out of it, out of weird crazy dreams in which he was falling over cliffs and into bottomless pits, where Apache devils shrieked and yelled gleefully as they grabbed hold of him and began to stick knives into his chest. He fought and moaned and a woman's voice said, "Lie still, Jim. Quit struggling, darling. It's Neely."

Fire was still shooting through his chest as he opened his eyes. He was flat on his back in bed, in the room he had previously occupied. Neely sat on the sheet beside him and he heard her crying.

He saw other faces in the room as the clouds cleared. Red and the Andersons and the Colonel and a young First Lieutenant who had medical instruments in his hands. An Army doctor.

He ceased his struggles and looked up. Neely had her arms around him. "Lie still, Jim. The doctor removed the bullet. You'll be all right, and I'm glad you got shot," she added fiercely.

"Why?" he whispered.

"Because now you can't leave," she almost hissed at him. "So I'm glad, I'm glad!"

"The Apaches?"

"They're gone...back to Sonora with a message for Geronimo. The General will talk with him and listen to his complaints."

Red bent over and grinned. "Thet was some gun-fight, boy. I wanted to give you a hand and square up with Pearson for robbin' my passengers, but like a dam' fool I couldn't get to my gun in time. It was on the piano under a quilt. Pearson and his segundo are done for, his gang wiped out, and you git the credit for it. Sailor Morton is dead. He kicked the bucket sometime during the excitement."

"Where's Bert?" Cort asked weakly of Neely.

"Hardy," guffawed Red, "is leavin' for the fort in the mawnin'. I heard the Colonel talkin' to him. He had

the choice of a court-martial or demotion. He took the demotion. He's now Second Lieutenant Hardy, subject to the General's final decision. What I want to know is why the hell they didn't bust him back to a mule tendin' private, like I told him when you b u s t e d up thet raid on the coach."

"What I want to know," Cort whispered weakly, "is why the hell you don't get out of here so I can use this good arm?"

"We're practically gone," grinned Red. "Come on, folks. I hear 'em bellerin' for me to come call another square dance. We'll bust up the place until daylight. Now thet you've got thet bullet—it was a forty-four, Jim—removed, you'll be up and around in no time."

They went out and Cort looked up at Neely, still bent over him. "I can still use this one good arm, Neely," he whispered.

"You won't have to use it, Jim," she whispered fiercely, and bent down to kiss him so h a r d and passionately that pain went through his lips.

It was a pain he didn't mind.

THE PINE BOX

In 1870 Old Man Coon was a sodbuster who lived on a litle piece of land halfway between Winfield and Texarkana, Kansas. His house was just a shell, made of hand-hewn logs plastered with mud. But the soil didn't produce enough to satisfy old Tom Coon, so he b u i l t a roadside tavern which he called *The Pine Box.*

It wasn't much else. It was square and small and had a low roof. The bar was less than four foot long and made of pine; the wall lamps were smoky and soot-blackened chimneys hid the jonquil beams; the s m a l l room was usually semi-dark. But *The Pine Box* earned for its owner forty thousand dollars profit in two years and a half. He finally sold out: his price was fifty thousand dollars. Two men, Russ Eberling and Wilfred Ransire became the new proprietors.

The stagecoach t r a i l passed the door. Traffic was heavy; land booms were on and the railroads were coming, and silver had been found at Leadville, Colorado, and there was Cripple Creek and Pike's Peak, so that there was always a flow of traffic along the b r o a d turnpike that passed the tavern. The old building had been destroyed and a new building erected in its place, five times as large as Tom Coon's old place, and a thousand times more elaborate. But the owners preferred the old title, and it remained *The Pine Box.* It is said that Eberling and Ransire made three hundred and fifty thousand dollars there before they got into a quarrel over a woman and had a gunfight in an upstairs bedroom. Both were hurt fatally, Eberling dying on the spot, and Ransire living until the next day. He died in *The Pine Box.* It virtually became a pine box for Eberling and Ransire. Nobody wanted it them; Eberling's son refused to claim it. The building went to staves; the windows fell out, the roof d r o p p e d in, tall weeds grew up through the cracks in the floor.

But just the same; *The Pine Box* was one of the most famous taverns and inns the west had ever known. It made everyone rich that ran it—Tom Coon, Eberling and Ransire.

Ransire was buried under a lonesome cottonwood in the rear of the cabin, in a coffin made of pine boards jerked out of the wall. Everling was carted off to Denver, in a coffin made of slabs pulled out of the floor of the tavern. The irony of it was then and there revealed; *The Pine Box* was jinxed; nobody wanted it. They said it would be like buying a coffin.

- -Rex Whitechurch

A Powerful Book-Length Mystery Novel

DIG ANOTHER GRAVE

by Don Cameron

King sat down wearily. "Don't run away. No one's going to hurt you. Take a chair." He ran his fingers through his rumpled hair. "Finding you here, and seeing him like that, my first thought was that you had killed him. Now I'm not sure."

"It was exactly the way I told you," Barbara said. "I hadn't even begun to suspect anything was wrong when you came in."

"That leaves me in a bad spot. I can't for the life of me think who could have done it, but the cops won't have any trouble making up their minds. At least a hundred people know I hated Searle's guts. Pretty nearly that many saw me knock him down an hour ago. Everybody will take it for granted that I killed him." He looked at her. "I didn't, you know."

"I can't think who could have."

"Besides me, you mean. You still think I did it, don't you?"

"I don't know... Can't the police prove what time he was killed? And can't you prove you were somewhere else?"

King scowled. "He must have been killed within the last half or three-quarters of an hour. A medical examiner can't fix the time of death to the split second. The time margin isn't wide enough to give me a clear bill."

"I can tell them he was dead when you came in..." Barbara said. "You see, I do believe you, after all."

"Don't stick your neck out. The rawest recruit on the District Attorney's staff could build a lovely case against you if he had the details... You and Searle were in love and fell out of love. Probably it could be shown that there was a serious quarrel between you. At any rate, he threatened to tell things that would embarass you and your father tried to gag him with money, but wouldn't part with as much as Searle needed... You see?"

This Novel appears complete in The September Issue of

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

THE GRUB LINE

THE END OF PERLEY PLANE

By John L. Cooney

AURORA'S pint-sized courtroom was packed to the doors when the afternoon session opened. It seemed as if everyone in Aurora—or, for that matter, everyone in Nevada had heard the rumor.

A hush fell over the courtroom as the immaculately clad defense attorney, the noted Pat Reddy, rose to address the court. In the dead silence, the horses tied tc the hitching rack outside the courtroom could be heard pawing nervously at the hard packed ground. A large blue horse-fly settled on the tip of the judges nose and then zoomed away with an angry buzz that seemed almost ear-shattering in the dead silence. A bearded miner coughed nervously.

"If it please the court," Reddy said quietly, "the defense wishes to call Perley Plane to the stand."

"C'mon up here and be sworn in, Perley," rasped the bailiff who was also Aurora's leading (and only) saddle maker.

The giant owner of the Golden Nugget Saloon lumbered forward to the witness chair. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling piously as he swore to "tell the whole truth".

According to rumor, Perley had warned Pat Reddy to be "a mite keerful" in his choice of questions. Otherwise, Perley strongly hinted, Reddy might never live to learn the verdict.

Now, it looked as if the rumors had been correct. Stationed at strategic points around the courtroom were a dozen or so of Plane's tough gunmen.

The trial was no minor affair. For many months, the miners and ranchers had been plagued with an epidemic of cattle-rustling, horse-stealing and sluice-box robberies. It seemed to be the work of one well-organized gang, but no one knew, at least officially, who the gang was or where it made its headuarters.

There were those who thought that one wouldn't have to go any further than the Golden Nugget Saloon to find the leader of the gang. But they wisely kept their thought to themselves. Perley Plane had a violent temper, and he didn't wear those well-notched guns for detective purposes.

But Perley wasn't on trial. It was Whitey Hanson, a young miner who had made a small strike a few weeks before and owned a valuable claim near Aurora.

Perley claimed that he had seen Whitey drive off a small herd of horses from the Collier Ranch. Whitley voiferously claimed his innocence and hired Pat Reddy, the most famous attorney in the inter-mountain area, to defend him.

PAT HAD no love for Perley Plane anyway. Some time before, someone had tried to bushwack him on Aurora's main street. Although the attempt had failed, it was necessary to amputate Reddy's right arm to save his life.

He was never able to prove it, but Reddy had always believed that Plane, or some member of his gang, had made the attempt. Reddy had accused the giant Plane of cheating in a card game, and, in the fight that naturally followed, had beaten the saloon-owner to a "bloody pulp", as one of the miners later described it.

Now Reddy did his fighting in a different way. He stood before Plane listening to his story. The empty right sleeve of his coat was pinned neatly across his chest. His left hand was concealed beneath the swallow tails of the coat.

Plane finished his story and sat back with a satisfied grin. Reddy looked at his notes and then walked forward.

"You said that you recognized Hanson at a distance of fifty yards. Since this was supposed to have been around midnight, how were you able to recognize him?"

"Well, there was a moon—"

"Yes," Reddy interrupted, "there was a moon, but it set at 10:46, and you said this was at midnight."

"Now see here, Reddy," the burly saloon-owner blustered. "You trying to say I ain't telling the truth or something. It coulda been earlier."

"It could've b e e n, Reddy agreed mildly, "except that you didn't leave the Golden Nugget until after eleven."

The courtroom buzzed excitedly and then suddenly quieted as one of Plane's gunmen loosened the gun in his holster and another stood up and leaned against the wall. The spectators in the first few rows of seats hunched down a bit, and two of them prudently got up and moved to the back of the room.

Reddy didn't take his eyes off the witness and he kept his left hand concealed beneath his coat.

"Mr. Plane," he said, "were you ever in prison?"

"No! Now listen, if you think you are gonna—"

"Just answer the questions, please. I have here a prison record showing that you served five years in Missouri for horse stealing. Did you forget that?"

Plane glared. His hand twitched spasmodically. The gunmen leaned foward expectantly. But Plane and his eyes riveted on Reddy's left arm. Sure, his boys would get Reddy, but Reddy would probably get him first.

"Answer the question!" Reddy snapped.

"I—I guess I musta forgot," Plane faltered, some of the confidence draining out of him.

THE CROWD tittered nervously Reddy went on hammering at Plane, asking one damaging question after another. As each forbidden question rolled out, Plane became more flustered and more thoroughly discredited. Perspiration l i t e r a l l y poured down his face.

Finally, Reddy nodded. He had completed his examination. The prosecuting attorney looked at the saloon owner thoughtfully for a minute. "No questions," he said.

Plane stumbled a bit as he left the witness chair. He didn't even pause at hs seat, but walked slowly out of the courtroom.

The prosecuting attorney conferred briefly with the judge. They called Reddy up to the bench.

"This puts an entirely different light on matters, Pat," the prosecuting attorney said. "We feel that the case should be dismissed."

"My client would prefer a directed acquittal," Reddy said. "He wants to be completely cleared."

After a moment's hesitation, the prosecuting attorney agreed. A few minutes later, Hanson was free.

Several excited miners rushed up to Reddy to shake his hand.

"Didja have a gun in the tail of your coat?" one of them asked Reddy.

"No, but I figured Plane was yellow and could be bluffed," Reddy said with a grin. "All I had in that pocket was this handkerchief. But Plane did not know that!"

That night, the thoroughly discredited Plane left Aurora. But the story of the trial had preceded him, and he wasn't able to stay in town very long. A few months later he was caught with a stolen horse and unceremoniously "strung up".

Incidentally, for some unknown reason, the crime wave ended abruptly when Plane left.

THE END

Turn of The Trail

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

(Author of "Empty Saddles")

Both Logan and McHuson were plumb concerned over Betty Lou's happiness . . .

"GO ON the Missoury if you like, Cotten. Go and the devil take you! I've had enough."

Del Logan tensed as McHuson's voice rose angrily, daring back-talk to the trail-boss. *I didn't think he had the guts*! Logan thought, with reluctant admiration. Other men were pulling their horses to a stop, suddenly tense. Bitterness had been building in them, worse with each day's drive. It was in Logan, and he knew that it must be in McHuson like a nagging toothache, in all ten of them who had come up from below the Little Brazos.

It was in Cotten too, of course. Most of all, for meanness dwelt in him like the leads in forty-five shells, and looked out of his eyes in the same evil fashion.

"What's that you're sayin', Mac?" Cotten demanded. "That you don't like my way of roddin' this drive?"

"You're damn right I don't," McHuson agreed, stubborn despite the warning in Cotten's words. He was a tall man, and thin, where Cotten was square and heavy, like his purpose. It was another long day's drive to the Canadian, where men might wash again.

"I'm for swingin' west by north at the Canadian," McHuson went on—apparently forgetful that Querty, who had demanded the same thing back at the Red, lay now in an unmarked grave. "Let's swing for Kansas and the railroad. They say it's buildin' to Abilene. That'll be easier than headin' for Missouri—and safer."

There was heavy silence as men remembered Querty. Logan waited, knowing that McQuerty had voiced what had been in the minds of each of them. There was a market for Texas beef in Missouri. But there was border gangs in between, rustling the herds which tried to reach that market, murdering the men who drove them.

"Nobody gets through, Missoury way," McHuson added. "And we each own some of these cattle, Cotten. We got somethin' to say."

He gestured toward the five thousand head which had come up the trail. His glance picked on Logan, hesitated briefly, resentfully.

"All but Logan," he added.

Cotten was keeping his temper admirably. It was his way—until the sudden, always deadly explosion.

"Kansas, eh? Rumors. Nothin' else. I'm not drivin' to a wilderness. I told you that, back at the Red. We set out to take this herd to Missouri. I own a third of it—more than any two of you. You named me trail boss. We're drivin' on—to Missouri."

The pronouncement was dangerous with warning. But McHuson shook his head.

"Not me," he repeated. "I say we turn at the Canadian." He looked to see who was back of him. But the faces were impassive. Logan saw that they sympathised with him, but they remembered Querty, who had demanded the change, then refused to go on. Cotten's long blacksnake had writhed about his face, making a crimson welt of it, the blood spurting through the skin. Querty had grabbed blindly for his gun, then gone to earth in a welter of gun-thunder not his own. And Querty had been accounted the equal of Cotten with a gun.

COTTEN'S reputation with blacksnake and guns was wider than Texas. His mouth drew down.

"And I say we don't! Do I have to kill you, Mac?"

McHuson was keeping back, out of whip range, but in easy gun-shot. He shrugged.

"If it comes to murder," he said thinly. "It might as well be here as in the Quachitas!"

Logan leaned forward. The festering bitterness of the dry trail was in him too. He had ridden the drag all the way up from the Brazos, eating the thickest dust. He alone of the crew had no stake in this herd, save his salary. He had signed on for what was admittedly a suicidal drive, just to get out of Texas.

He had expected some of the others to side McHuson. It was funny, how you could hate a man and still admire him. Now he could more easily understand Betty Lou's choice. But none of the others were going to stand with McHuson. They had no love for Cotten, but they feared him.

"You're askin' for it, Mac," Cotten grated. "It's yore own choice. And nobody's backin' you—"

"I am," said Logan. He twisted in the saddle, easing his weight. Not that it would do any good. He was slow with a gun, and all men there knew it.

His words fell flatly. Men stirred, surprise in their eyes, largest in Cotten's, but nearly as strong in McHuson's

"What did you say, Logan?" Cotten demanded. One hand toyed above his coiled blacksnake. Logan was close enough to reach.

"I said that I'm backin' McHuson in this," Logan retorted.

"Why?" Cotten demanded again. He shook his head, an evilly anticipatory glint in his eyes, fingers hovering like hooked claws. "You're the last man I'd pick to back *him,*" he added.

That was logic, for everyone knew how he and McHuson hated each other. As they knew what that hate stemmed from. Both men had loved the same girl, below the Brazos. When she had favored McHuson, Logan had signed this drive, just to get away. Unknowing until it was too late that McHuson would go along as well.

Those were the facts, and their logic was good. But there was other logic in him, born of the long days, the longer nights, when a man had nothing to do but think. Logan answered simply.

"Reckon you're right, Cotten. But women are scarce, back in Texas—specially good women. And they've a right to choose for themselves. Betty Lou, it seems like she favors Mac. That's her right. I can't set by and see her sort of widowed before she's a wife, to be left broken-hearted. So I'm sidin' with McHuson."

This was not what any of them had expected, that a saddlebum, and the loser, should find it in him, for the love of a women who was lost to him, to raise so high. Cotten's voice was sharp with contempt. He had no use for sentiment.

"You're a fool, Logan."

He implied than the bare words. *Keep out of this, you fool, while I kill your rival, and you might still have a chance*! Logan shook his head stubbornly.

"A women has a right to what she

wants," he repeated. "It's little enough she gets in this kind of country."

McHuson was eyeing him queerly. But Cotten was enraged.

"We're drivin' to Missouri," he repeated. "I tolerate no revolt." As Logan shook his head, the whip came streaking, before the words had hardly left his lips—the lash of the blacksnake, aimed for his throat. Cotten had a cunning way with the whip, to wrap it about the throat of a man, and with a jerk to crack his neck in one continuing motion. He'd aimed to do that with Querty, but had hit a little high.

TENSED BY fear, Logan was ready. He did not make the mistake of going for his gun. But he lifted a hand and grabbed, and luck as well as desperation guided him. The cutting edge of the whip was in his fingers, burning like fire, but he jerked with all his strength, and the surprise caught Cotten off-guard. The blacksnake came loose in Logan's grip, dragged along the ground between with a popping spurt of dust.

Cotten stared for an instant in shocked surprise. Long enough for Logan to gather in the whip, to get the handle in his grasp. Cotten's hand stabbed down then in the draw for which he was so famous.

But, though none of these men knew it, Logan had served his time as a mule-skinner. The whip was his weapon, even more than it had been Cotten's. He lashed out with it, and here was a blinding speed. Cotten squalled—for it was jerking his hand up and back, twisted about his wrist in the same deadly hold that he had used on the throats of men. His gun came out of the holster and plopped in the dust.

One gun. Cotten had a second, and as the lash came loose he was rearing his horse back, out of the way of the whip's reach. Death glared from his eyes. But this time it was the unexpected which halted him. Perhaps Cotten's failure had something to do with it. The voice of Poco Riley, who rode the swing. Poco, who owned a tenth of the herd.

"Wait a minute, Cotten," he suggested. "Reckon we're all for Kansas, when it comes to that. We been for it ever since we got word that Jess Chisholm had marked a trail with his wagons, runnin' horses an' meat for the army. And ever since we heard that the railroad's buildin' to Abilene. That's a better risk than Missoury."

Riley fell silent. It was a long speech for a man chary of words. But proportionately, they carried a lot of weight.

Cotton eyed him angrily. His glance ranged to Logan, recoiling the blacksnake, and on to the rest of the crew.

"Any more fools here?" Cotten asked.

"Reckon we're all fools, like Poco says," Laredo Mann sighed. "It's Kansas, Cotten."

The others, now that the pendulum had started, swung with it. They had favored it all along, but McHuson had not been enough to make them risk the wrath of Cotten—not with the memory of Querty raw in their minds. It had taken Logan's stand, his startling defeat of the trail boss, to do that. Now they were against Cotten to a man, and in the face of such odds, there was nothing that he could do about it. He looked wrathfully at Logan.

"Then it's Kansas," he agreed. "And if there's no railroad there, your foolishness be upon your own heads. You've a stake in the herd, at least." His eyes returned to Logan, fell to the red welt on his wrist. "All but you. We're drivin' to Kansas—but not you. I won't have a trouble-maker in the bunch."

IT WAS dismissal, with Logan the scape-goat for his wrath. He was wrong, for it was Querty and McHuson who first had voiced revolt, and McHuson would go on with the herd, because he was part owner. But in the bigger sense, Cotten was right. He could have handled McHuson.

Since Cotten was trail-boss, they couldn't appeal the dismissal. It meant disgrace for Logan, loss of wages, and perhaps death, alone in

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Sitting Pretty — Once

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Yes, it was a nice scheme — while it lasted . . .

TO LOOK at me now, a stove-up old wreck what can't do nothin' more useful'n rustle grub for a roundup crew, you would not suppose I'd ever been up in the world and settin' pretty, would you?

Dog-nab my hide I'd still be settin' pretty if it hadn't been for a cow thief who thunk he was smarter'n a fox. That thief ain't never yet felt a rope tighten 'round his gullet and bein' as how some thirty odd years has slipped past, maybe he never will. Nobody huntin' him now, you see.

Yep, thirty odd years ago 'twas, up in the Fire Hole country, where lived a couple of ranchers, neighbors on the same creek which twisted back into the big piney hills. No other folks close to bother 'em. I'll call one Smith, t'other one Drake. Smith had a hired man name of Tugwell. But Drake—except for his little wife—wonder what become of her? She sure was sweet—done most of his work alone.

Smith had a couple hundred dogies he branded Bar S and Drake likewise had a couple or maybe three hundred cow brutes he branded Cross Eight. Friendly neighbors, their dogies grazed the same range, Drake doing the riding for both outfits. Come winter they'd roundup, get their herd cut apart and into their fields to feed 'em hay.

Come one certain fall and Smith t'oncet found himself mighty short of cattle. Them Bar S critters had sprouted wings. Odd thing about it was that all of Drake's dogies turned up. He gathered full count of his stuff.

Hired man Tugwell had a medicine talk with his boss Smith, pointing out there was a sidewinder in the grass

and that sidewinder's name, Tugwell allowed, was Drake. Smith was a quiet speaking man who loved peace. Yet he was one deep thinker, too. So he smoothed down his ringy hired man, sayin', "We ain't got no proof and don't you let your tongue run away with your hoss sense, Tug."

Then he squinted up along the open valley, toward Drake's ranch and remarked thoughtful, "I don't figure our neighbor has got more'n half enough hay to winter his herd. On t'other hand, Tug, we'll have a couple hundred tons we won't know what to do with now we've got nary a cow."

Tugwell raved, "You're busted, and what'll happen to your missus?" Smith bein' married all same as Drake. "I sure wouldn't take this layin' down," Tug snorted on. "Let's go hunt for them cattle."

They loaded a bed and a jag of grub on a pack horse and went a-prowling back into the mountains. And b'gosh they found the Bar S herd in Salt Lick Park.

Said open park had been fenced a cabin built and three-four hundred tons of hay had been cut and stacked. Two men, wintry-eyed gents, plenty wolfish lookin' besides, were holding down the cabin. They had saddle horses, a team, a sled and hayrack. It looked to Smith like they sure intended to hold his Bar S herd—if altering the brands was a sign to go by. For over the Bar S was a fresh brand readin' Cross Eight.

Tugwell and Smith stood at the edge on the woods, getting an eyeful until at last Tug exploded, "What we waiting for, boss?"

Smith smoothed his mustache of which he had a lot all copper colored like his hair, and that squint eyed thoughtfulness held him for another minute before he said, "Put away your war paint, Tug. Looks to me like there's plenty of hay for my dogies and them two husky boys—they are husky, Tug—sure aim to feed that hay to the cattle. It'd be a shame to disappoint 'em."

Tug blew up proper. A man who wouldn't fight for his own stock was not worth fighting for. Tug had a notion to quit and join the rustlers himself rather than stay with such a yellow pup as Smith, he said, plenty snorty.

But Smith quieted the fire-eating hired man and they moseyed back home. Drake was waiting for 'em, a little mite anxious—as was to be expected when he was terrible concerned over his neighbor's loss.

"Nary trace, hide nor hair nor hoof mark of the missing doges," Smith reported with his face drawn out longer'n a fiddle bow.

Smith's wife began to bawl and Drake said it was a dreadful thing to have happen to his dear friends, the Smiths. But now they hadn't no dogies maybe they could spare Drake a couple o' hundred tons of hay.

Smith said sure he could, and Drake figured 'twas all settled where he could get feed without any trouble.

COME JANUARY the neighbors were snowbound, no trails broke to town or anywhere, except on their ranches. Drake, bundled up in his wolf skin and wearing quite a beard, plowed through a blizzard to see Smith. When he got in the house and thawed the icicles off his wiskers and eyebrows he mentioned hay.

"Looks like I'll need the whole crop you've got, Smith. How much you going to ask your neighbor?"

Smith smoothed his mustache and squinted thoughtful like he had a habit of doing. The man was deep, deeper'n Drake had ever reckoned on.

"We've been hit awful hard, me and the wife," he said. "We still got the ranch, but it'll have to be mortgaged to buy more dogies."

"Leadin' up to what?" asked Drake gettin' suspicious

"We-ll maybe the sale of hay'll kind of make up for the loss of our cattle," Smith said, "Hate to do this to a good neighbor, Drake, but you see how 'tis. I'll have to ask twenty dollars a ton for my hay."

Drake lifted the roof off the cabin. He sputtered, choked, cussed, roared. Smith wasn't acting neighborly, was

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The Hopeful Harriet

By FRED HARVEY

Here's what can happen when a man gets himself a mail-order bride!

THE MINERS club saloon in Glory Hole was almost crowded. Pete Simmons was to be married the following day and the mining camp was invited in to free drinks. The woman that Pete was to marry was an Easterner, from New York. He had placed an advertisement in a New York paper which read as follows: A lady of refined taste to meet mine owner. Must be able to rough it. Object matrimony. Send picture.

He had received several answers and pictures. The one he had chosen was a redheaded woman of about thirty years of age and good looking. Her name was Harriet. She was dressed in the height of fashion. A fancy blouse with Leg-O'-Mutton sleeves and a high neck.

To insure her safe arrival he wrote he would name the mine in her honor. It would be called the Hopeful Harriet. He also sent in reply a picture of himself dressed in the latest style. His big drooping mustache was trimmed and waxed at the tips. The little hair that was left on his head was greased and combed around to best cover the large bald spot. He wasn't bad looking when he was cleaned up, which was seldom.

Harriet would arrive in Glory Hole the following afternoon. Meanwhile it was time to celebrate. He had had several drinks already and was in a gay festive mood.

"Come on folks," he called. "The drinks are on me. I'm celebrating and everyone is gonna have a good time."

The miners took advantage of the free drinks and soon became gloriously drunk. Pete was feeling good. Money came easily, for his claim was producing plenty of high grade gold ore.

"Keep setting them up, bartender. Have one yourself."

He went around and had a drink with everyone he spoke to. He was becoming rowdy and loud now; unsteady on his legs but still he kept on drinking. Staggering up to a young man who was drinking beer he slapped him on the back and said.

"The drinks are on me. I'm gonna drink with you. Bartender, pass the whiskey. Me and my friend is taking a drink."

The young man said, "Thanks, I don't drink whiskey. It's bad for my heart. I'll take beer though."

"Now wait a minute," said Pete. "When I say drink I mean whiskey. When the drinks are on me you drink what I say."

Pete took the bottle and poured two glasses of whiskey, sprinkling the bar liberally with it, and passed it to the young man.

"I don't drink the stuff," said the young man.

Pete picked up the glass of liquor and planked it down and said.

"When I say drink that's what I mean and you drink the same as me. Now you goldarn son, get to drinking."

The young man paled at these words but still refused and said. "I'm a friendly man, mister. I don't aim for no trouble, but when you say that smile."

"I ain't smiling and I'm calling you again. Any man that don't drink is a goldarn son!"

There wasn't much else to do. The young man pulled a gun and shot him dead. The miners thought it was pretty good and said that Pete deserved it. The saloon owner had the body dragged out and ordered another round of drinks on the house. After

a few minutes one of the miners realized that it was Pete that was killed.

"Hell! We ain't gonna have a wedding," he said.

Another voice spoke up. "There's got to be a wedding. That redheaded woman is coming tomorrow. Someone has to to meet and marry her. We can't disappoint a lady."

The men in the saloon were by no means cowards, but marrying, that was asking for trouble—it was a little too much.

"I got an idea," sad the first speaker. "The young fellow that killed Pete has got to marry the woman and he gets the claim too."

All in the saloon agreed it was a good idea. It was unanimous, that is, except for the victim who protested vigorously.

"We'll string you up if you don't marry the woman. Make up your mind pronto." His mind was made up. "Very well," he said.

THE AFTERNOON stage arrived in Glory Hole on time and there was a crowd to meet it. The only passenger to get off was a big woman —in an enormous sort of way. She didn't resemble the one in the picture and the miners were disappointed. They were worried for a moment until the woman passenger shouted in a loud booming voice. "Where's my man? I am looking for Pete Simmons.

"Say," said one of the miners. "Are you the one that's gonna marry Pete? You don't look like the pictures he showed us."

"I'm the one, oldtimer, I'm Harriet. Where's he at?"

The miners pushed the victim toward the woman and said. "There he is, Harriet girl. He ain't Pete but he's better looking and full of life and fight."

"Who in the Tarnation is this fellow," she boomed. "He ain't my Pete. Where's my man? Don't try fooling me or I'll slap you all down."

Someone in the crowd told her that he was killed and that the man who killed him was going to marry her instead.

"Is this the fellow that did it?" she said, looking him over.

"That's the one," the miner said. "And when you're both hitched you both get Pete's claim."

"Well that's different. Come over here, let's have a look at you." She pulled the young man toward her and said, "Turn around."

The man refused but she spun him around as if he had been a mere babe.

"Well, he ain't too big but he's better looking. Guess I'm going to like him. What's your name?"

"Bill Douglas, and I'm not marrying anyone," he answered.

"Well I'll be damned! Full of spunk. That's what I like." She took hold of the young man by the arm and pulled him toward her and planted a kiss on his lips and hugged him tightly.

"I'm going to like you. We're going to get along fine."

The young man blushed and struggled. It was no use. She had him in a firm grasp. The miners roared with laughter and slapped each other on the back and said, "That's a woman, Harriet. What a gal! Wouldn't mind having you for myself."

Everyone was full of gaiety except the intended bridegroom.

Big John Gilman the blacksmith preacher, married them there and then, performing the ceremony by heart. Soon as it was finished he shouted to the crowd, "Let's all have a drink. They're on me." They went to the nearest bar to celebrate.

IT WAS a great doing. Not since the first strike in camp was everyone so happy and friendly with one another. The liquor was downed as fast as the men could pour it and, in very little time at all most of them were drunk and full of trouble.

The newly wedded groom had tried to get away from his bride but she held on too solidly to him. Every so often she would pull him toward her and plant a big juicy whiskey-flavored kiss on his face.

A drunken miner tried to make the young man drink whiskey. He refused. The miner swore at him.

"Say," shouted the bride. "You can't say that to my man."

With a mighty swing she aimed a blow at the miner. Missing him she hit another, knocking him down. Several others, being drunk, fell down too. In less than a minute things began to pop. Whiskey bottles, chairs, tables and a few scattered shots from a pistol were mixed in the free for all.

During the mad scramble the husky bride picked up her husband easily and carried him bodily through the back door. She hired a livery rig and together they headed for the nearest railroad and were never heard of again.

The next day, those men whose heads were not cracked or groggy from the saloon brawl got it through their thick heads that the Hopeful Harriet was minus an owner. There was no legal heir to lay claim to the mine and even if there were it would make no difference. There was a concentrated rush to the mine shaft.

Sam Jenkins, owner of the saloon where the fracas took place claimed it by reason of his wrecked bar and had seven men to back him up. "Big Moose" Daly, gave notice to all and sundry that the mine was going to belong to him and challenged one or a group to fight it out. There were no takers. The Big Moose would kill them all—his strength was enormous. The crowd grumbled and it looked like trouble again. Finally, Sam Jenkins said, "Let's settle this peaceable like and give everyone a fair chance. We'll go down to my place and, over a few drinks, do this right."

They readily agreed and followed Sam Jenkins to his saloon.

While the men were drinking Sam Jenkins sent five of his men, heavily armed to guard the mine for him and sent another to town to record the mine in his name.

Later, when the miners discovered the trick played on them they once more wrecked the saloon. Nothing could be done, however, for possession ruled and the Hopeful Harriet had a new owner.

CANYON OF DEATH

BECAUSE a former captive couldn't resist taunting her enemies, nearly a hundred of her people were slain. To this day white marks on the walls of "Massacre Cave" in northeastern Arizona stand as grim reminders of her folly.

Situated high in the rimrock, hundreds of feet above the level floor of Canyon del Muerto, Navajo warriors thought it would be a safe hiding place for their families until their return from an expedition in the year of 1804 or '05. But they reckoned not with human frailties and the merciless hand of vengeance.

The Spainards and Navajos, as well as other tribes of Pueblo lands, had been enemies since the days of the Conquistadores, and not long after the Navajo braves rode away a group of Spanish soldiers marched down the rugged gorge in the hope of avenging past grievances. Little dreaming that their quarry was just above them, they had passed the cave's location when an aged Navajo squaw ventured near the ledge.

"Blind pigs!" she screamed in Spanish, learned while a prisoner of the Mexicans during her girlhood. "Must you always walk as men without eyes!" And thinking herself safe and secure she continued to hurl taunts and insults.

The Spainards, now apprised of the hideout, proceeded to cut off all means of escape while a few riflemen climbed to the mesa top and edged to an outcropping of rock. From this promontory vantagepoint they commanded a good view of the cave and its defenseless occupants.

Those who survived the first volley of withering fire fled for cover behind the cave's rocks, but they were not safe there, for the marksmen fired at the walls, counting on an occasional carome shot to find their mark, so intense was their hatred.

When no further movement was noted within the cave, watchers below, upon a signal from the riflemen, climbed into the cavern, crushed the skulls of those still breathing and, very aptly, christened the twenty-five-mile-long gorge "Canyon of Death."

—L. C. Davis

The City Builder

By REX WHITECHURCH

(Author of "Pretty Wagon Pilot")

Here comes Lancey Houck and his carpet-bags, his little bullet-headed Negro, Gunboat; and his dark-browed bodyguard, Tex Stevens; and — here comes the crowd. Yeah, Lancey Houck brought the crowds streaming along in his wake, wherever he went, up or down river; wherever he stopped and walked down the lowering gangplank, that's where the crowd appeared and often stayed — and helped Lancey Houck build his cities.

HE WAS a colorful character and he fitted into almost any picture anyone wanted to draw. He was tall and he was handsome and he was dark and he was a veritable fashion plate.

But his appearance was deceiving inasmuch as, even though he struck you as being a cultured and polished gentleman, he could swear and fight and gamble with the best of them. He liked to swing his big fists and wrestle with the bullies of those Missouri River towns, to which he journeyed in the interest of the future. Lancey Houck would back down from no man.

Why then his bodyguard? It seemed incredible, but Lancey Houck was merely carrying out the terms of his father's will. "NO MATTER WHERE MY SON GOES HE MUST HAVE WITH HIM AT ALL TIMES A GOOD PISTOL MAN TO PROTECT HIM." Thus ran the strange codicil of the fat will that enabled Lancey Houck to travel extensively and to spot future cities and to invest the Houck money in the prospects of that particular town growing into a thriving metropolis.

Lancey's father was a Saint Louis brewer in 1837; a very small brewer who made a very large fortune. He sent Lancey, his only son, away to a military academy and, because Lancey shot a fellow student in a pistol duel, his father yanked him right home again. He demanded that Lancey never lay his hand upon a pistol again as long as he lived except in self defense and that the gun be carried by another man. So Lancey kept the strange agreement he had made with his father and hired Tex Stevens, a gunhawk from Texas, to carry his shootin' irons.

Now about Gunboat, the little Negro? Well, all Lancey ever let Gunboat carry was his carpet bag. He was another result of old Simon Houck's last will and testament. There'd always been a little Gunboat, with a bullet head, in the Houck family, to serve as gentleman's valet, or whatever the gentleman needed him for. All those little Gunboats were excellent servants and devoted to their masters.

Lancey Houck went to Saint Joe and played cards with Joe Robidoux, the French trader who had founded the town on the Missouri River which was soon to become famous. The two men must have quarreled, maybe over the cards, and Lancey left early the next morning, and went to Westport Landing. Then the race began. Kansas City rose from the mysterious ramparts of the Landing into a towering city of spires and smokestacks, and Saint Joe grew right along at the heels of the bigger place, losing in population but not in majesty.

Lancey then went on to Omaha, with the swelling crowds at his feet;

from Omaha he went to Denver, and he speculated in cattle and added to his already bulky fortune. He got interested in gold mining; and he was in the silver rush to Leadville, Colorado. There he almost got himself killed by a young miner over a dance-hall girl. Lancey saw that he was going to be shot. The miner was walking toward him with a cocked .45. Tex Stevens was standing at the bar.

"He'll tell his hired gunhand to let Dave have it," said a miner to a pal. "He ain't got the guts to do his own fighting!"

Lancey didn't hear this. But he wheeled, grabbed the gun Tex had placed coolly on the bar and, swinging round, shot the miner smack between the eyes before the latter could pull trigger.

Lancey didn't even tell the girl goodbye, that's how deep his interest in her was and, with Gunboat and Tex Stevens, he took a stagecoach to Dodge City.

Dodge was still having growing pains and floundering all over twenty acres of hard baked Kansas ground. A few tents still stood in the street down near the stockyards where droves of cowboys were herding droves of western cattle and dust was rising in eerie spirals. But mostly the town consisted of falsefronts and wooden awnings and there was an utter lack of accomodations that a man could find in the river towns. Lancey took one look, frowned and registered at the Dodge Hotel. But he slept out on the ground under the cold twinkle of stars because the proprietor of the hotel had refused to give Gunboat lodging for the night and wanted him to sleep out with the dogs in the barn. Lancey Houck returned to the river that he loved with all his heart, and he never again left it. Dodge might have done as well as twenty other places that started to booming when Lancey Houck cast a favorable eye upon them. But it did not, and it soon curled up in the hot sun, but remained a mighty important place, for all of that.

Restless as ever, Lancey got into a poker game and won more money aboard the river boat "Saint Louis" than he could stuff into his roomy carpetbag.

One of the disgruntled gamblers accused him of cheating, of dealing off the bottom of the deck, or something; and Lancey passed it off with a laugh, saying, "It surely must be I'm a magician."

The big handsome forty year old city builder walked out on deck, and the irate professional gambler followed. Tex Steve..s was coming along the deck whistling. Gunboat was scrooged up on a pile of furs in the shadows strumming his banjo and rendering expertly his favorite, "IF YOU WANTS TO HAB FUN JINE TH' CALVERY—

Two shots crashed out and Lancey stopped, lifted his head, reared up to his toes and fell stiffly forward.

Four more shots rang out. Tex Stevens shot the murdering gambler four times before he could hit the deck, every bullet entering the gambler's face. Lancey lived ten minutes. He lived long enough to ask Tex to see that his body got home, to Old Saint Louis. He shook hands with Gunboat whose tears dropped onto his paling face; Lancey Houck smiled and said:

"I'm going to build another city where there won't be no guns—"

And there he died in the arms of the woman who loved him, Anne Carter.

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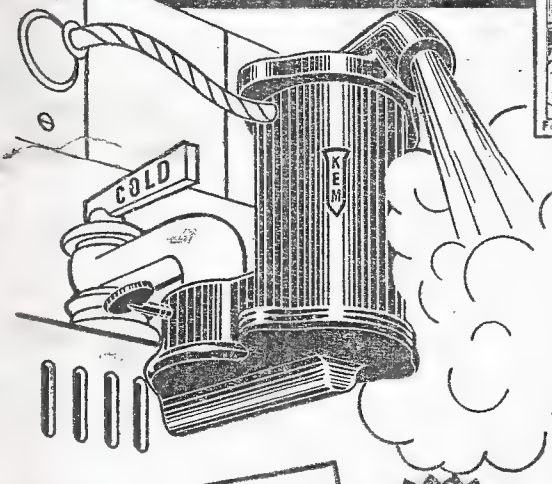

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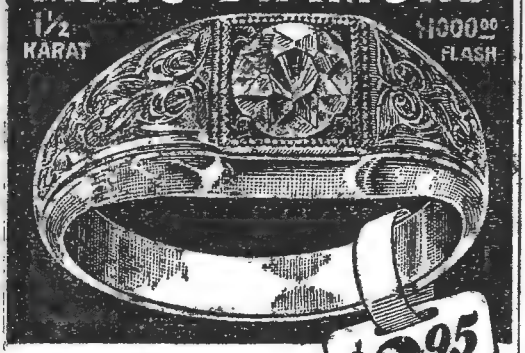
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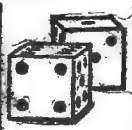
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THE REAL WEST

CEDAR BRAKE DANCES

BY HAROLD PREECE

When the wax started popping out of the cedar trees, One-Eyed Jim Riley always started tuning up his fiddle.

HE'D START cutting down on our favorite tunes back there in the cedar brakes —"Possum Up the Chinaberry Tree," "Cotton Eye Joe," and "Cowboy's Dream." He'd fiddle so long and so fine that people passing his ranch would just naturally find their toes jiggling. Then somebody would figure it was a shame that Jim Riley was wasting his fiddling on two string-halted mules and a flop-eared hound. One of the Tougates or Hudson or Preeces would send out word about a dance at his house come Saturday. Saturday following somebody else would give a dance. And every Saturday night, till the weather got hot and the dance season gave way to the revival season, there would be a foot-poundin' somewhere on Bull Creek.

The cedar brake dances have been gone these long years—so have One-

Eyed Jim Riley and his fiddle that talked. I last saw Jim in a dirty alley in a Texas city. The fiddle had been out away forever, but his old friends had chipped in together and bought him one of these new-fangled things called radios. Just before he died, he told me:

"Son, these tune boxes sound mighty purty. But they'll never have what my old home-made fiddle had. When I started hittin' it with the bow, folks just rared up out o' their chairs and started shakin' that foot."

Nowadays, our folks on Bull Creek dance to battery set radios. Or they go out on Saturday night to the roadhouses and step it off to the jukebox. But in the days when I was another cedar brake young 'un, the Saturday night dance was not only an entertainment. It was also the forum where people thrashed out politics—who was going to be the next county commissioner or the next sheriff. It was the place where they came to swap hogs and horses. It was the accepted sparkin' bee for the young folks pairing off to get married. And, often, it was the duelling place of young gallants who met each other with knives, knuckles, and six-shooters.

And I reckon it was a kind of a hill country democracy that we never missed till it was gone. For nobody ever waited to be invited to a shindig, you came. When a family decided to hold a dance, they told their neighbors over on the next hill or creek bank. Those neighbors told the next closest family. And so it went till, maybe, everybody in a radius of forty miles would know about the dance. My dad used to think nothing of riding that many miles to a dance before stepping it off with the pretty gals all night long. Maybe on the way back, he'd hitch his horse to a cedar, sleep a few hours and then ride on back home. Next Saturday night, he'd be saddling up his pony and be on the go again.

(Continued On Page 88)

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(Continued From Page 87)

A little after sundown, the folks would start gathering at the place where the dance was scheduled. One-Eyed Jim or maybe the blind fiddler, Bryce Mangham, would already be there tuning up his instrument. For when you gave a dance, it was courtesy to ask the fiddler to come over and have supper beforehand.

More and more people would drift in—whole families in buggies and buckboards and on foot. Old friends would seek each other out to shake hands. Old enemies would start measuring each other with their eyes. Mutual friends would start making plans to keep them from clashing in a stabbing or shooting spree before the evening was over. When the "floor manager" arrived—and he always made his entrance like a grand impresario,— the caller for the evening would take his stand. The fiddler's bow would crack down with a flourish on his instrument. The music would fill the cabin and scare the hair off the wildcats down in the draw. The caller would begin singing:

"Git away, Old Dan Tucker,
You're too late to git your supper."

Bright-eyed girls would grab the hands of laughing boys. Older men would grab women who, maybe, they had courted as girls and lost to more favored suiters. Kids of ten and twelve would join in the square dance because cedar brake young 'uns, so it was said, learned to ride and shoot and dance and drink whiskey before they learned to talk.

Everybody danced with everybody else, though, in the square dance. You grabbed the hand of a girl, circled her, and then grabbed the next girl of sixteen or sixty. I was a great big boy before I ever saw any modern "round dancing" or knew that anybody fooled away his time with it. Even then, some of the conservative older folk denounced it as being "just

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plumb indecent." They kept their young sprouts away from the homes that departed from the old orthodox square dance. "It just ain't right," my old Aunt Rachel used to say, "for a man to hug up a gal 'fore he's married to her. And, even then, he oughta go a little sparin' on it."

AFTER EACH dance, every man who swung in the set marched up to drop a dime in a cup by the fiddler's chair. If One-Eyed Jim or Blind Byce was at the fiddle, you dropped in a little more if you could spare it. In One-Eyed Jim's case, it was not just charity. It was the cedar brake way of acknowledging that he was a man for the way he had stood by his scrape-grace brother.

Emmett Riley, at the age of seventeen, had be accused of killing a man in a fight at one of the dances. Whether he did it or not, I won't say. But Sheriff White had loped up from Austin to find the killer and circumstance pointed to Emmett. Then Jim, years older than his kid brother, had stepped forward and "confessed" the killing. Everyone of us tight-mouthed cedar brake folks knew that Jim had been off chopping cedar in Bell County, sixty miles away, when the shooting happened. But we didn't say a word to any outsiders those three years when Jim was away doing time on a prison farm in the hot East Texas swamps.

When he got back, though, we tried to make up to him for what had happened. He was always our first choice for the fiddling whenever any of us gave a dance.

If you didn't have the money to pay Jim or whoever did the fiddling, you said nothing and the fiddler said nothing. But it was understood that you'd drop over to his house, some time during the week, and casually offer to do some work. If you couldn't get off to work out the debt, you sent the fiddler a gallon of molasses, a ham of a hog, or something else to show him that you weren't dead-beating.

Sometimes, at the dances, the fidd-

(Continued On Page 90)

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You Will Bless the Day You Answered This Advertisement

(Continued From Page 89)

ler and the caller would get into a big argument. The fiddler would complain that the caller was calling to slow. Or the caller would say that the fiddler was sawing it out to fast. Then the floor manager, who was both master of ceremonies and bouncer, would try to straighten out the argument so that the dance could go on. If anybody gave in, it was generally the caller.

It was easy to pick up another caller from the crowd. But if the fiddler got mad and went home, everybody else might as well leave too.

In fact, the caller was considerably "second fiddle." It was strictly bad manners for him not to invite other men to call during the dance. For at least one or two dances, the host of the evening must also be asked to call.

But while the music was getting hotter and hotter on the floor, so were tempers that had been not before the dance started. No cedar braker who thought anything of his reputation ever commenced a battle on the floor. But there were perfectly sanctioned ways of getting your enemy out of the house and down into the woods.

You could shine up to his girl, and that was sure to result in a low-whispered invitation to "step outside." You could step on his foot once or twice and get by with an "excuse me." But if you stepped on it a third time—well that was a recognized form of challenge in the hill country.

I never attended a cedar brake dance where there wasn't six fights. I've seen men stand up to each other with the long one-bladed "Dallas Special" knives that you could get from any general store. I saw one man slashed to ribbons but be up gunning the next month for the neighbor who had cut him. I've seen young fellows square off in bloody fist fights that would have drawn top gates if they had been ring affairs. A couple of times, I saw men shoot each other—especially after they'd been likkered up on the Bull Creek moonshine. Our stills never run dry back there even if Bull Creek does once in awhile.

Occasionally the fights would be

stopped by men slipping out into the woods to take nips from the jugs cached around.

Sometimes, the floor manager would hear that trouble was going on outside. He would nod silently at somebody who would come and take his place. Then he would light out to the woods, find the two who were slugging it out, and try to stop the trouble. On occasions, he would order one or both of them home and, if necessary, he would commission friends of each slugger to carry them home—seperately.

But an all round truce was declared when twelve o' clock came. That was time for the midnight supper that set off every dance.

The big table in the kitchen would be loaded down with cakes and pies, with big bowls of shelled pecans and walnuts. Two of the men would drag in a big washpot of coffee from where it had been simmering over a slow fire in the yard. Everybody helped himself to the coffee and to whatever was on the table. And everybody ate plenty.

And, always, you must tell your hostess that this was "the smackiest tastin' pie" you ever et in your life. She, on the other hand had to tell you that her pie was "mighty pore stuff" compared to what your wife or mother made.

Maybe, at supper time, the parents of some girl would let out what everybody was already knowing. They would tell their neighbors, gathered around the table, that she was marrying the boy who'd been sparking her regularly. Then the girl would get kissed by everybody, the boy would be pounded and jostled. When "weddin' news" was told, the fiddle always sang louder for the rest of the dance from midnight to dawn. The hair ribbons on the girls looked brighter, and the greased-up boots of the men seemed a little shinier. Before the dance broke up, the engaged couple would be put in the center of a square, and One-Eyed Jim would strike up a tune in their honor.

Then the crowd would dance around them, singing:

(Continued On Page 92)

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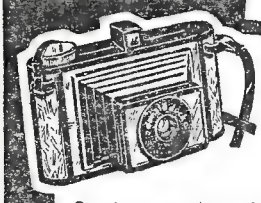

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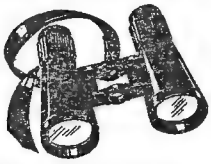

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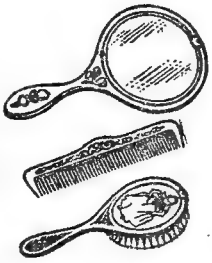

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

"Rocky road we have to travel,
Rocky road we have to travel,
Rocky road we have to travel,
To see this couple married.

"Saddle up, boys, and let's go with 'em.
Saddle up, boys, and let's go with 'em.
Saddle up, boys, and let's go with 'em
To see this couple married."

TURN OF THE TRAIL

(Continued From Page 77)

this wilderness. That was what Cotten was counting on.

Logan shrugged, rolling his tarp. What did it matter? The herd was moving on, the others lifting their hands to him in silent farewell. All but McHuson. For days they had not spoken, and never more than could be avoided. Now McHuson came up, his face a strange mixture of emotions.

"Uh—you'd do better to head back for the Brazos," McHuson said jerkily. "Betty Lou 'll be right tickled to see you."

"What do you mean?" Logan demanded, his voice sharp with incredulity.

McHuson waved to encompass the horizon, and managed a grin which split the dust-cake on his face.

"Why do you think *I* started a suicide trip?" he asked. "You was sure wrong, Logan, thinkin' it was me she favored. And I hated you to the point where I sure as blazes didn't aim to set you right. But you said that a woman had a right to choose for herself—and I reckon you're right. If you could do that for Betty Lou—I want her happy, too." He extended his hand. "Reckon you'll be showin' us a streak of dust, Logan."

★ ★

KINGDOM ON THE GOLDEN GATE

By Will Watson

HAD A drunken miner staggered out of a San Francisco saloon in 1859, and met the man dressed in his royal finery, the miner might have gasped, "Now who the hell is that gent. Some foreign duke or prince or somethin'?"

"That's Emperor Norton."

"Emperor? Emperor of what?"

"Of these United States, miner."

The miner would probably protest that the United States had no emperor and that Uncle Sam was a democrat, and not an aristocrat—and Uncle Same wore long striped pants, not a royal dress-suit. Or he might have accepted Emperor Norton and let it ride at that.

San Francisco, ten years after the gold rush, accepted him, but paid him no attention.

San Francisco first heard of Emperor Norton when the *Bulletin* told amazed citizens that one Jashua Norton had proclaimed himself emperor of the United Staes. But dubious San Franciscoans paid the gratis political announcement small heed. They were too busy enjoying themselves and chasing the almighty dollar which, in some cases, had not been minted yet, but was in the form of gold dust.

Nor were many surprised when they met Emperor Norton on the streets. For the emperor was all that royalty proclaimed—a blue military uniform, a stove-pipe hat, yellow epaulets. He carried a cane and a dignified air.

Therefore they failed to take the Emperor seriously. Therefore, a month later, another imperial edict abolished the Congress of the United States. People would bow to him, scrape their feet, and then promptly forget him.

Evidently this angered the Emperor, for people evidently refused to accept his government officially. He then passed another royal edict, dis-

(Continued On Page 94)

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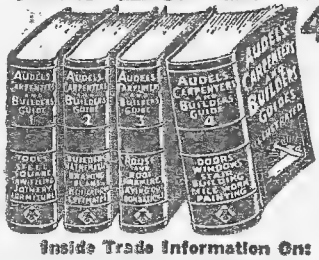

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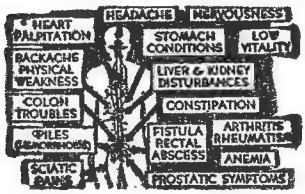

No obligation. Write to Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite C-1011, 926 McGee St., Kansas City, Mo.

(Continued From Page 93)

solving the Republic of the United States.

His empire thus established, Emperor Norton continued a successful reign along San Francisco's Market Street and waterfront. He even issued some paper money and bonds, all today being in collectors' hands.

ORIGINALLY from Cape Town, South Africa, the Emperor came to San Francisco as plain Joshua Norton, where he went immediately into business. Money was not scarce in San Francisco, for the placer diggings still panned out well, and shipping interests were developing the Golden Gate, with a money-quick eye on Oriental trade.

Then Joshua Norton tried to corner the rice-market, a necessity for San Francisco's many Chinese, who labored on railroad construction or who ran gambling-joints along the water-front. He put his fortune into this. When he had the rice under control, and more fortune ready to grasp, two ships sailed in, loaded with rice from China.

Therefore, Chinese chop-sticks had rice to pick at, and they picked the foundation out from under Norton's fortune. Norton's rice lost value and he disappeared from public life for a while.

But he returned.

And when he did return, he was Emperor Norton, not plain Joshua Norton. And San Francisco, out of the largeness of its big heart, accepted him and his royal edicts. They accepted him in saloons and stores and along the streets.

He would nod gravely as the women bowed. Tailors gave him new uniforms, for he was a good advertisement, and printers gladly printed his money, for this way they also advertised their wares. Milliners put gaudy plumes in his beaver hats and adjusted his epaulets properly. He trod his Imperial path in peace, congenial subjects.

But one thing bothered him.

Mexico wasn't making the progress being eked out by the United States.

(Continued On Page 96)

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KINGDOM ON THE GOLDEN GATE

(Continued From Page 94)

Revolutions and internal questions bothered the Sister Republic to the South. He pondered over this for some days and finally proclaimed himself the Protector of Mexico. But he also kept his title as Emperor of the United Staes.

Whether the Mexican peons ever knew of this royal edict or whether they never learned about it is not recorded in history, but probably had they known they would not have worried about such a far step.

THOUGH some regarded him as a madman, while others pleased him out of good-heartedness, he still had vision, for one proclamation called for erection of what is now Bay Bridge. And when the Bridge was constructed, some sixty years later, the foundations were set on almost the identical spots Emperor Norton called for in his print.

For twenty years golden-hearted San Francisco accepted his "rule." Possibly this was partially due to the fact he had two rough-looking watchdogs with him to enforce any law to which an ambitious or misguided citizen might rebel. He gave lectures and had a sharp mind, except for this little royal quirk.

He died of an apoleptic stroke. Thousands of his "subjects" passed by his coffin before burial. And San Francisco did not forget him. In 1934 his body was reburied, with honors, in a newer cemetery.

His tombstone reads:

Norton I
Emperor
Of The United States
and
Protector of Mexico

Joshua A. Norton
1819-1880

* * *

(Continued From Page 79)

not acting white. 'Twas robbery and he, Drake, wouldn't pay through his nose for hay.

Tugwell, listenin' in from the other room, began appreciatin' for the first time that Smith was quite a feller after all. And Tugwell knew Smith had Drake over a barrel, unless Drake took a notion to put Smith and Tug and Mrs. Smith too, out of his way. Tug thought Drake might consider that idea, but when he mentioned it to his boss, Smith said, "He'll steal all right. But I've got his number. He ain't got the guts to shoot anybody. And it ain't possible for him to go to Salt Lick Park even on snow shoes to get either of them two tough-nuts to do any more dirty work for him.... 'Course maybe he'll let his cows starve to death."

Drake did think of that, but he figured it'd be cutting off his own nose to spite his face. After all, he had a half interest in the herd being wintered in Salt Lick Park. The boys in with him getting half for their work and for putting up the hay on land they hadn't troubled to file on. By spring the fresh brands would be haired over neat and by fall they'd turn that herd.

'Twas best and smartest for Drake to save his original bunch, the cattle on his ranch. Maybe he could steal some hay from Smith. But since Tugwell was a pretty salty customer, who would shoot at the drop of the hat, Drake forgot that idea.

ALONG IN February he went down the valley to see his neighbor again. All the begging and whinin' he could do didn't move Smith. 'Twould cost Drake four thousand bucks for two hundred tons of hay. If Drake was short on dough, Smith would take his note secured by a mortgage on the Cross Eight ranch.

That was the way the deal was made. The neighbors snowshoed to town and had the papers drawn up proper, another of Smith's ideas.

Now the Smith hay put Drake's cattle through into May in fine shape. Quick as the snow was gone and he didn't have to be on the job every day he rode to Salt Lick Park.

The brands had haired over on the cattle there. They were fat and a good calf crop was in sight. Drake talked things over with his pals and they all allowed they'd put over a slick steal. 'Twas workin' out Jim Dandy.

Drake was half way home when all at once he heard horses ploddin' up along the brushy draw. He reined into a willow patch and watched his neighbor Smith and Tugwell with the sheriff and a couple of ranchers from farther out in the valley ride past. They were headin' toward Salt Lick Park and all of 'em carried rifles.

Drake had a bad spell just then. His nerve kind of ran out at his boot toes. Maybe by circling around and ridin' like the devil was on his tail—he felt the devil was—he could beat that bunch to the park and warn his pards. Them hard-bitten buzzards would fight. But Drake ddn't want to be in it. No sirie!

He headed for home, not letting grass grow under his horse's hoofs. And with a lot of misery boiling round in him on account of the way he was leaving his wife, he kept right on goin'.

There wasn't much of a fight in the park. The two toughs yanked their smokers, but the sheriff dropped one and Tugwell, who'd been achin' for seven-eight months for a scrap, dropped t'other. Then Smith beefed one heifer to skin it and show the lawman and the neighbors how his brand had been worked over to make Drake's Cross Eight. Which sent the sheriff a-lookin' for Drake, muy pronto.

But the law ain't never caught up with that cow thief who once thunk he was plenty smart. This I should know better'n anybody else for in them days thirty odd years ago the name I rightly went by was Drake!

THE END

MEN! DON'T STAY FAT

You CAN LOSE UP TO 7 POUNDS IN ONE WEEK

SAFELY! WITHOUT RISKING HEALTH

Good for Ladies, too!

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NO STARVATION
NO EXERCISE
NO MASSAGE
NOTHING TO WEAR

LOSE UGLY FAT NOW . . . Notice the difference in POUNDS and INCHES the very first week, whether Overweight 10 or 100 Pounds . . . even if burdened with Fat for many years (illness excepted). The Protam Plan controls weight . . . once down to normal, it helps retain your new "athlete's waistline" as long as you like . . . NOT A TEMPORARY LOSS. Protam is not a Drug, Laxative or Thyroid . . . absolutely Harmless . . . Is Good For You.

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REDUCE WITHIN 10 DAYS OR MONEY REFUNDED

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Patricia O'Connor Secures Position as Social Director. Though Inexperienced in Hotel Work.

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"How I Stepped into Big Pay Hotel Job"

Louis C. Schmitz Driver-Salesman, Who Knew Nothing About Hotel Work. Now Assistant Manager.

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DR. J. C. SHOTTON
Prominent Cleveland dentist—inventor of Dr. Shotton's Non-Condensing Sanaton Pipe.

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Dr. Shotton realized that the *real secret* of a dry, sweet pipe is to *prevent* "goo" from forming at all! So instead of placing a catch-all gadget in the Sanaton pipe, he placed a small slotted tube at the bottom of the *bowl*. This tube acts as a NON-condenser, for as you light this pipe the tube warms up—and there's no cold surface on which "goo" can condense! No condensation, no "goo." It's as simple as that!

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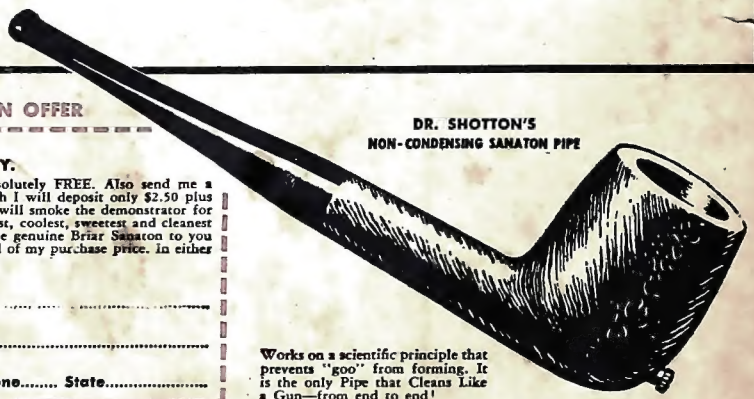
Send for your free demonstrator today and test the principle of Dr. Shotton's Non-Condensing Sanaton Pipe yourself. If you don't agree that every word I've said is true, the trial will cost nothing! Mail the coupon NOW.



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